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Teaching Interculturality: Considering Three Different Cultural Approaches in Intercultural Business Relationships

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Abstract

In the international business (IB) research field, many have suggested paradigmatic changes to address the complexity of cultural issues. Different paradigms represent different approaches to culture, and in this study, we apply positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches in the context of IB relationships. To address these different approaches within IB instruction, we introduce the theory of interpersonal knowledge. By utilizing this theory and examples of how to analyze business relationships using different approaches to culture, IB teachers can clarify the different approaches and help their students deepen their understanding of the meaning of interpersonal-level analysis in intercultural business settings.

Keywords

teaching intercultural business, different approaches to culture, interpersonal relationships

Introduction

In international business (IB) fields, including international management, organizational theory, intercultural communication, cross-cultural governance, among others, cultural studies have lacked consensus and coherence for several decades. Despite the long history of teaching and learning cross-cultural and intercultural communication

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within business schools and programmes, studies show that there is still a need for incorporating cross-cultural and intercultural communication comprehensively and systematically into undergraduate business communication (e.g., Smallwood, 2020). Simultaneously, many scholars have suggested paradigmatic changes in IB studies to address the complexity of cultural issues (e.g., Lowe et al., 2012; Rohlfer & Zhang, 2016; Szkudlarek et al., 2020). Scholars specializing in cross-cultural management have identified several major approaches that seem to have guided studies in IB fields over the past few decades (Barmeyer & Mayer, 2020; Primecz et al., 2009; Romani et al., 2024). Despite attempts to connect and/or combine different paradigms and approaches (Lowe et al., 2012; Patel, 2016), IB fields appear to have been lost among methodologically distinct research “tribes” (Lowe et al., 2012, p. 752).

As authors of this article, we are also teachers in the fields of intercultural communication and IB. Through our teaching experiences, we understand the appeal of cross-cultural, country-specific knowledge when managing students’ uncertainty in IB contexts. Students attending our courses in intercultural communication and IB often wish to “learn about other cultures” (see Siljamäki & Anttila, 2022). Further, many studies on cross-cultural business instruction still apply theories that consider culture from a mainly postpositivist perspective as something that people “have” and something that will automatically influence an individual’s communication (e.g., Smallwood, 2020; Swartz et al., 2020). However, three to four different approaches to culture (depending on the authors) have been addressed in IB fields, and therefore it is not simple to say what should be taught to the students who wish to learn about other cultures. It is typical for students who have been exposed to the different approaches, to juggle those approaches and use them inconsistently (Kokkonen et al., 2022). To follow the development in the field, the paradigm shift, and to understand more deeply the interplay between culture and interaction in business, we argue that the different perspectives should be presented to and critically discussed with the learners.

In this article, we use the broad categorizations of *positivist*, *interpretive*, and *critical* approaches (see Romani et al., 2024). In the positivist approach, culture is understood as a fundamental element influencing people’s communication in a given situation (e.g., positivist understanding of culture), often referring to a national culture as a category of analysis (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). In the interpretive and critical approaches, culture is viewed as an abstract imagined construct that is created, negotiated, and re-created in social interaction (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015), always changing and multivariate (Angouri, 2010).

For decades, the positivist approach has dominated IB fields (Lowe et al., 2012), but many scholars have suggested a shift away from the positivist approach to a less essentialist understanding of culture and communication in IB (e.g., Szkudlarek et al., 2020; Witte, 2010), following the overall development in the social sciences as many phenomena are seen as fluid and dynamic, instead of fixed and permanent (Bauman, 2012). However, there are fewer suggestions on how to breach the gap across the different approaches.

In today’s global economy, business people and sales experts are expected to form and maintain relationships with international customers. For a long time, in the

international business-to-business (B2B) sales literature, it has been considered that when buyers and sellers represent different cultural backgrounds, it inevitably acts as a barrier to fruitful communication (e.g., Griffith, 2002). To help IB students address the different approaches to culture, we introduce a novel theory from the field of communication to deepen students' understanding of cross-cultural business relationships. We refer to the theory of interpersonal knowledge (Walther, 2022), which explains how individuals seek different kinds of information from their interaction partners to develop intimacy and trust. We know that salespeople's knowledge is important because the seller's expertise has a strong positive impact on the quality of the salesperson-customer relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006). Using Walther's theory, we aim to understand and illustrate the appeal of simplified cross-cultural knowledge that many scholars consider misleading (McSweeney, 2002, 2009) and too shallow (Holliday, 1999; Szkudlarek et al., 2020). The theory moves on by explaining why such cultural knowledge is insufficient and why interpersonal knowledge is required to really build trust and intimacy in interpersonal relationships. In addition to introducing a theory that can be regarded as a metatheory guiding the focus of teaching and training, we bring forward concrete ideas of how to address issues of interpersonal relationship development in diverse, cross-cultural contexts.

Much of the literature that addresses the need for a paradigmatic change in IB fields focuses on how culture could be studied and discussed at organizational and/or management levels (Lowe et al., 2012; Rohlfer & Zhang, 2016; Romani et al., 2024). However, there is much less critical research on how to build and maintain interpersonal relationships with cross-cultural customers, even though interpersonal relationships lie at the center of business activities (Koponen et al., 2021; Szkudlarek et al., 2020). In this article, we discuss the different approaches to culture in IB teaching. Here, we apply an interpersonal perspective on intercultural communication and focus on international buyer–seller relationships, following scholars who point out that cultures are not the ones that meet and interact but people do and that “culture only matters to the extent it is manifest in and through people in interaction” (Spitzberg, 2015, p. 24).

Different Approaches to Culture in IB fields

IB research has a strong history in comparative cross-cultural studies where the national culture categorization is used as the main factor to explain people's behavior in IB settings (Lowe et al., 2012; Szkudlarek et al., 2020). Although this dominant approach has been challenged many times (Leung et al., 2005; Patel, 2016; Tsui et al., 2007; Witte, 2010), cross-cultural research on cultural values in different business settings still dominates IB fields (Szkudlarek et al., 2020), and current research seems to conform to the existing cultural categorizations (see, e.g., Bharadwaj, 2023). In IB research, different approaches to culture seem to have been in conflict to the extent of “inter-paradigmatic warfare” (Lowe et al., 2012, p. 753). This major clash could occur between essentialist and nonessentialist approaches to culture and cultural studies. In short, the essentialist view follows the idea that culture is a concrete social

phenomenon that represents the essential character of a group of people, often a particular nation. From this perspective, we may think that people belong to a specific culture or that they have a culture that guides their behavior in any given situation. In contrast, the nonessentialist approach to culture relies on the idea that culture is a movable concept used by different people at various times to suit the purposes of identity, politics, and science (Holliday, 1999). Furthermore, from the nonessentialist perspective, culture and identity are perceived as processual and fluid (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015; Schnurr & Zayts, 2017).

Romani et al. (2024) have divided the different IB paradigms into three major categories. The first is the *positivist* approach that follows the essentialist understanding of culture and aims to identify patterned behaviors across cultures. According to Romani et al. (2024), the positivist approach aims to “focus on regularities in the form of cultural universals or dimensions which record differences across cultures” (p. 113). This positivist comparative cross-cultural approach represents the essentialist view that sees culture as a concept often operationalized as a value dimension, and the idea is that national cultures guide people’s interpretations, thoughts, and behaviors. This understanding of culture follows the “*Hofstedian legacy*,” as Holliday (2010, p. 6) calls it, by perceiving culture as a sustainable entity that pre-exists in social interaction (see Hofstede, 1991).

The second approach is *interpretive*, which addresses the notion of culture as a socially constructed and fluid concept, as opposed to the postpositivist understanding of culture as a predetermined variable that automatically influences communication. According to Romani et al. (2024), “this view endeavors to understand how people perceive their (cultural) reality and act accordingly” (p. 119). Interpretive approaches draw from the idea that ways of speaking are shaped and reinforced by speakers’ understanding of and affective orientation toward themselves, others, and social life (see, e.g., Bernstein, 1964). In research that adopts an interpretivist approach, sense-making in communication is regarded as inherently partial, imperfect, and fleeting, rather than merely a decoding process. Philipsen (2014) argues that restricted coding, such as depending on broad national cultural assumptions, leads individuals to rely on presumed shared contexts. This reliance detracts from recognizing and adapting to the unique personal circumstances present in interactions.

The third is the *critical* approach to IB, according to Romani et al. (2024). This approach addresses issues of macro contexts, power, relevance, and the hidden and destabilizing aspects of culture. For Martin and Nakayama (2000), the critical perspective seeks to “understand the role of power and contextual constraints on communication in order ultimately to achieve a more equitable society” (p. 8). Romani et al. (2024) illustrate this concept by writing how “critical researchers are interested in contradictions, conflict, ambiguity and fluidity, in other words, indicators of the power relationships that shape reality” (p. 124). Halualani and Nakayama (2010) point out that “critical intercultural communication studies [are] best suited to pay close attention to and follow how macro conditions and structures of power (the authority of history, economic and market conditions, formal political sphere, institutional arenas,

and ideologies) play into and share micro acts/processes of communication between/among cultural groups/members” (p. 5).

The critical approach also pays attention to language as part of the constructed realities. Some scholars aim to “show how language, discourses and, for example, corporate communication contain implicit ideological views that influence how we perceive and relate to others” (Romani et al., 2024, p. 124). The expanding influence of critical and postcolonial scholarship has also led to questions about the conceptualizations of IB education originating from the West/Global North (e.g., Witte, 2010), and there is growing criticism of enduring Western hegemony in intellectual thought (e.g., Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; R’boul, 2021). Lately, the critical approach to culture and intercultural communication is eminent in research looking into language use and language practices in business settings. Studies looking at power dynamics in situations and contexts where business English is seen as a lingua franca provide insights into how perceived power is embedded in everyday business discourses (e.g., Roshid & Chowdhury, 2024) and suggest approaches for instructors aiming to emphasize intercultural professional communication and shift away from viewing English as a fixed, standardized language (e.g., Hodges & Seawright, 2023). A short summary of the different approaches to culture is illustrated in Table 1 which is based on an article by Romani et al. (2024).

In teaching, the denial or condemnation of the often-automatized utilization of cross-cultural or culture-specific knowledge is problematic. Many teachers and researchers have created an understanding of different cultures within the framework of positivistic models and theories of intercultural communication, and people’s personal experiences of intercultural encounters may have enhanced the idea of stereotypical, culture-specific knowledge being handy when aiming at managing uncertainty in intercultural encounters (see, e.g., Kokkonen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, some researchers have noted that studies following only the essentialist, often positivist approaches, do not document the interactive, evolving, and complex process of communication in different contexts, situations, and relationships but only provide a partial understanding of the role of communication in intercultural encounters (Szkudlarek et al., 2020; Witte, 2010). Others view the postmodern, postindustrial, and globalized world as requiring an approach that considers the perspectives of expanded global multiple cultures that regard culture and identity as processual, polymorphous, liminal, complex, and transient (e.g., Holliday, 1999, 2010).

Cross-cultural insights can guide individual’s sense-making concerning group-level differences and culturally contingent patterns, which may have little or no relevance to an individual (e.g., salesperson or customer) who may or may not identify oneself with the given categorization or cultural group. While acknowledging the benefits of cross-cultural research that compares national cultures based on their differences, Szkudlarek et al. (2020) suggest that the field of IB should still move toward a less essentialist direction. This approach requires different ways of understanding relationships with cross-cultural customers at the interpersonal level. In this article, we follow some researchers’ advice that instead of abandoning or condemning some approaches, we should understand the differences among them. This position means

Table 1. Different Approaches to Culture.

Approach	Understanding of “Culture” and Interaction
Positivist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (National) culture can be used as a major factor explaining individuals’ communication in different situations and contexts. • Cultures are divided into clear categories (e.g., individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures). • Comparative cross-cultural studies where national cultures are viewed as predetermined explanations for human interaction (e.g., Hofstede). • Cultural identity/identities and competency can be measured and assessed formally.
Interpretive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This view endeavors to understand how people perceive their (cultural) reality and act accordingly. • It considers that individuals act consistently with what makes sense to them, and therefore the focus of the research is this sense-making. • In management, interpretive researchers are generally not interested in comparing different cultures, but rather, understanding how people’s collective sense-making in a certain community/culture explains their actions. • Underlining the idea that there are tremendous variations between individuals, social groups, or genders and age groups, for example, in possible ways of making sense of situations.
Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations are often seen as oppressive structures. • Societies seems to be unfair, and organizations seem to be even more problematic. • There is a systematic inequality in societies and it is even larger in organizations. • Research relies heavily on postcolonial theories, feminist theories, and critical diversity studies. • Critical researchers are interested in contradictions, conflicts, ambiguity, and fluidity—in other words, indicators of the power relationships that shape the reality we encounter.

teaching our students to recognize the diversity among the approaches and helping them analyze and reflect on phenomena from various perspectives (e.g., Romani et al., 2024).

Approaching IB Through a Theory of Interpersonal Knowledge

Interpersonal relationships are said to form the foundation of successful cross-cultural B2B sales. Here, we present the theory of interpersonal knowledge to increase our understanding of why cultural-level knowledge is insufficient to manage possible uncertainties embedded in a novel cross-cultural business relationship. The theory highlights the meaning of interaction and interpersonal-level analysis while aiming at understanding complex, fluid, and multifaceted cultural identities and encounters. We also use the theory to frame the idea of different approaches coming together rather

than working against one another. What is relevant is for teachers and learners alike to understand what the different approaches or paradigms present, how they perceive culture, and how this then reflects the ways we teach and learn about IB.

The appeal of cultural-level explanations and cross-cultural concepts in current research could be viewed through Walther's (2022) theory of interpersonal knowledge. This theory explains how individuals seek different kinds of information and often use existing knowledge on different categories of people to manage the uncertainty of meeting a person for the first time. In the latter situation, individuals often rely on stereotypical knowledge about the category of people with whom they associate that person. As studies on intercultural communication have shown, such categorization and generalization of stereotypical knowledge can be misleading in interpersonal encounters (McSweeney, 2002, 2009).

Walther (2022) has introduced a theory of interpersonal knowledge that describes the interaction requirements to develop dyad-specific familiarity, based on the idea that when meeting a person for the first time, people acquire knowledge about the individual at four levels to manage the possible uncertainty arising from their unfamiliarity with the other person and/or the situation. The foundations of the theory lie in the uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger et al., 1976), which states that knowledge helps people reduce and/or manage the uncertainty that they experience when interacting with strangers. The more that people can manage the uncertainty, the more enjoyable the interaction becomes, in turn enhancing the intimacy and trust in the relationship. The four levels of knowledge, according to the theory of interpersonal knowledge, are illustrated in Table 2.

To some extent, Walther's (2022) theory is rooted in the postpositivist tradition and based on Miller and Steinberg's (1975) original typology of cultural, sociological, and psychological levels of knowledge. However, according to Walther (2022), these theories fall short in distinguishing the psychological from the interpersonal level of knowledge and "the kinds of communication that are necessary to acquire such knowledge" (p. 391). To really know or predict how a person would respond to another, one should have the interpersonal knowledge gained in a real interaction with the other. According to Walther (2022), there remains a difference between "knowing someone else versus knowing that someone else knows us" (p. 392).

Focusing on Interpersonal Relationships When Teaching and Learning IB

Frame (2012) argues that interactions at a functional level in intercultural contexts do not inherently lead to the formation of intercultural friendships or the enhancement of intercultural competence. In fact, Frame suggests that what is often called "intercultural" group work—typically brief encounters with students from different countries—may even reinforce cultural stereotypes. Additionally, Kudo et al. (2020) observe that many studies on intercultural student relationships have a narrow focus, emphasizing limited interactions or interactional difficulties while neglecting the

Table 2. Four levels of interpersonal knowledge by Walther (2022).

Level of knowledge	Type of Knowledge
Cultural	- Cultural-level assumptions are made quickly and more or less automatically when meeting people for the first time (e.g., general body shape, clothes, stereotypes).
Sociological	- Acquired through additional observations of someone - Describes people's impressions of someone's social categories (e.g., their assumptions about the person's age, status, profession, and stereotypes in these various social categories)
Psychological	- Acquired through substantial observations (e.g., what the target person does and how the individual does it) - Knowledge about the target's unique personality, more particular than cultural and sociological levels of knowledge
Interpersonal	- An individual generates and develops interpersonal knowledge when interacting with another person. Therefore, this knowledge is dyadic, gained experientially, and related to unique communication patterns between certain people. It is not possible to gain this level of knowledge without interacting with the target.

emergence and development of deep, long-lasting intercultural relationships, such as friendships.

When combining the interpersonal level from Walther's (2022) theory with the different approaches to IB, we find that in the positivist approach, the cultural-level knowledge still dominates when initiating and developing intercultural relationships. As illustrated in Table 3, the level of analysis mostly includes culture-specific knowledge by aiming at understanding the cultural differences in business relationships.

We suggest considering interpersonal relationships as both the content and the context of the teaching about IB. Interpersonal relationships are crucial for effective learning. Research on instructional communication has identified several interpersonal variables that enhance learning, such as immediacy, communicator style, affinity-seeking, self-disclosure, solidarity, humor, caring, and compliance-gaining (for a summary of previous research, see Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2000). Recent studies also confirm that cultivating trusting relationships in online learning environments significantly improves learning outcomes (see, e.g., Horila & Raappana, 2023). Thus, we bring forward the idea of learning situations within teaching and learning about IB as also constituting a learning experience in interpersonal relationships. Despite the call for more cost-effective artificial intelligence-enhanced learning opportunities (Aggarwal & Wu, 2023), we encourage interdisciplinary, intercultural, and multilingual (diverse) interactive learning as much as possible. In such an environment, students can experience, practice, and reflect on initiating and maintaining such relationships in authentic situations. In cases of simply using cases and hypothetical examples of intercultural communication, following Walther's (2022) idea,

Table 3. Examples of Analyzing Sales Relationships Using Different Approaches to Culture.

Approach	Focus Within the Relationships	Example of Analysis of Sales Relationships Between Finnish Salespersons and Japanese Buyers
Positivist	(National) cultural-level knowledge	How Japanese negotiate with Finns and what relevant cultural differences should be considered when initiating and maintaining the customer relationship
Interpretive	How different concepts, such as cultural identity, are negotiated in interactions between individuals	How participants discuss and negotiate their cultural identities, finding similarities and a shared understanding of phenomena while creating trust and intimacy within the customer relationship
Critical	How different contextual and macro-level phenomena are manifested and negotiated within buyer-seller relationships	How language practices reflect and create power relationships between the participants and how different positions in a global business setting affect the buyer-seller (personal) relationships

this learning would be based on an illusion and a false idea of “knowing.” Next, we introduce a pedagogical solution for considering interpersonal relationships when teaching and learning about IB.

Pedagogical Solutions for Learning Different Approaches to Culture

A solution for teaching different cultural approaches to IB students and helping them reflect on these ideas at the interpersonal level is suggested in Table 4. With an intercultural group of IB students, we suggest initially holding an interactive session where students have an opportunity to meet one another and start bonding. To facilitate this activity, teachers must also pay attention to the overall atmosphere in the learning group and guide learners in not only discussing their differences but also trying to find similarities among them. It is a good idea to have shared norms and discussions on the house rules for the group at this stage of the learning process.

To reflect on initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships in the learning groups, there should be enough interactions among the students. There also needs to be a real project for them to work on to keep them motivated and focused on the work. Preferably, the project should focus on the course content/the teacher’s area of expertise and provide opportunities for the students to work with the same people long enough to analyze and reflect on their interpersonal relationship development. The fundamental elements of this kind of pedagogical solution include providing knowledge about the different approaches to culture, as well as developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships within the IB student groups. These interventions should be

Table 4. Example of Pedagogical Solutions and Contents for Focusing on Interpersonal Relationships.

Aim of the Session	Content of the Session/Learning Event	Possible Teaching Methods and Exercises
Raise awareness and build an understanding of the three different cultural paradigms in international business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing knowledge of the three key cultural paradigms in international business, with concrete examples related to business life - Analyzing different intercultural texts (in a broad sense, including literature, video, audio, pictures, etc.) using the different approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-person or online meetings - Academic readings/literature (preferably read before the discussions/lectures) - Analysis of texts (in a broad sense) using the different approaches - Discussions on applying the different approaches to deepen the understanding about each approach
Gain new insights on international buyer-seller relationship development and personal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing knowledge from research findings related to international buyer-seller relationship development - Reflecting on one's own experiences of the interpersonal relationship development (e.g., friendships) - Providing knowledge of key issues related to interpersonal relationship development (e.g., liking, self-disclosure, similarity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-person or online lectures/discussions - Readings/literature based on relevant research - Small group discussions, either in person or in online chat rooms
Gain experience on intercultural communication and practice communication and multilingual communication/language skills in a multicultural group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Undertaking project and group work that enables students to work together over a certain period (several meetings and shared goals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working on the project outside the set classroom/online teaching hours

done through discussions, readings, expert lectures, and so on. Simply assigning students to diverse multilingual groups, assuming that they can figure things out by themselves, is not recommended. There is enough evidence of the kinds of negative outcomes of such experiments, and students can come out from these kinds of learning situations as more ethnocentric and having less understanding of diversity than previously (e.g., Holmes, 2006; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). Whether the teaching takes place online or physically in the same location, the mere presence of students with

diverse cultural backgrounds is insufficient to harness the rich potential of student diversity as an educational resource (e.g., Leask, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Helm & Guth, 2022; Thom, 2010). Teachers' guidance and support are needed.

Finally, instead of, or at least in addition to, culture-specific knowledge about different values, norms, and behavioral patterns, IB training should focus on general cultural phenomena, such as dealing with complexity, managing uncertainty, and being aware of stereotypes. All these phenomena have a huge influence on interpersonal relationship development. We believe that in this rapidly changing world, it is highly important to have the ability to deal with reluctance and fear, monitor feelings and emotions, work through confusion, and grapple with complexity (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012) as part of learning about IB.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this article, we have introduced positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches to culture, which should be considered when teaching cultural issues to IB students. Furthermore, to help IB students address these different approaches, we have presented the theory of interpersonal knowledge (Walther, 2022). This theory highlights the meaning of interaction and interpersonal-level analysis while aiming at understanding complex, fluid, and multifaceted cultural identities and encounters.

We have shown that by utilizing the theory of interpersonal knowledge (Walther, 2022) in teaching IB, teachers may help their students deepen their understanding of cross-cultural B2B sales relationships. We have cited examples of how to analyze B2B sales relationships based on different approaches to culture, an idea that can be easily applied to IB teaching. IB teachers may also use the theory of interpersonal knowledge to frame the notion of different approaches to culture coming together rather than working against one another. Finally, we have provided a pedagogical solution that will enable IB students to learn and apply different cultural approaches. In the future, IB researchers could conduct pedagogical experiments to test how this type of solution works in practice and what kinds of learning outcomes are possible to achieve.

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