

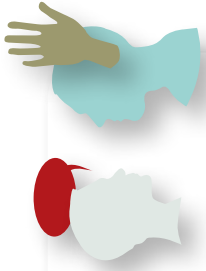
An illustration at the top of the page features several stylized silhouettes of people's heads and hands in various colors (blue, red, gold, pink, white, purple, teal). Some are facing each other as if in conversation, with speech bubbles above them. A hand is shown reaching out from the right side. The background is a light teal color.

# Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Concepts for discussion



Language Policy Division



The **Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters** is a concrete response to the recommendations of the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity" (<http://www.coe.int/dialogue>), Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", paragraph 152:

"Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."

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For further acknowledgements, please see the *Introduction*.

The views expressed in the *Autobiography* and supporting documents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Council of Europe.

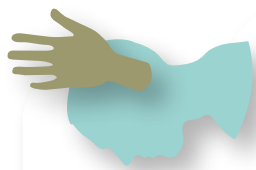
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# Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

## Concepts for discussion

## Introduction

*The following definitions and questions have been formulated to encourage young people (in the final years of school education or early years of higher education) to engage with key concepts related to culture, identity and cultural interaction. They are designed to introduce students to the terminology of cultural discourse, to enable students to make connections between these concepts, the societies in which they live and their own lives, and so support their development as intercultural learners. The questions provide stimulus for group discussions. Facilitators of these discussions may wish to familiarise themselves with the fuller descriptions of the concepts in the longer concept paper, 'Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters: Context, Concepts and Theories', before the session, or to direct their students towards this fuller version after the discussion to consolidate and extend their learning.*

### a) Culture

- Are there elements in your life that you (or others) might view as part of your culture? What are they? How did you acquire them?

The word '**culture**' is associated with practices, beliefs, values, symbols and traditions, with particular ways of living and of understanding the world. Cultures can be understood as the fixed, inherited features of different national, ethnic and religious groups. This way of talking about culture as the distinct and essential features of a particular group is called 'dominant' discourse. Cultures can also be understood as dynamic and changing, continually being redefined by individuals and groups as they interact with others of different backgrounds or respond to changing circumstances. This way of talking about culture is known as 'demotic discourse'.

- What might the benefits and disadvantages be of having a strong sense of a fixed, inherited cultural identity?
- Can you think of any instances in your environment where interactions between different cultures are creating new cultural expressions?

## b) Multicultural societies

- Could the society in which you live be described as a multicultural society? Explain your answer?

A **multicultural society** is a society that has become culturally diverse through the immigration of people born and raised in other cultures who have brought elements of their heritage culture to the new society where they have settled. Sometimes multicultural societies are understood as a patchwork of distinct cultural groups living alongside each other but separately. The reality is usually more complex both because of the internal diversity of different cultural groups and because of the dynamic interaction between different cultures, values, practices and identities in those societies.

Societies can respond in different ways to their cultural plurality by public recognition of various minority ethnic, cultural and religious identities and public celebration of their distinctiveness (sometimes called 'multiculturalism'), or by emphasising the common bonds of the society and the shared identity of its members.

- Consider the responses to cultural diversity above. Can you think of instances of either the public celebration of cultural difference or a public emphasis on shared identity in the society or the country where you live?
- What do you think are the most appropriate responses schools and educational institutions can make to the diversity of multicultural societies?

## c) Attitudes to other cultures

*Amina, a devout Muslim has three non-Muslim neighbours who are aware that she prays regularly five times a day.*

*Neighbour A thinks that Amina's prayer routine is really a waste of time but accepts that Amina has a right to do it if she wants.*

*Neighbour B thinks that the prayer routine is a good thing for Amina as it gives her a discipline and purpose and, in her thinking, brings her closer to God.*

*Neighbour C is very interested in Amina's prayer routine, she has talked about it with her and shared with Amina her own ideas about how she might benefit herself from a regular time for reflection in her own daily routine.*

- What words would you use to describe the different attitudes shown by the three neighbours to Amina's practice and beliefs?

There are a number of ways in which we can respond to people of other cultures with different beliefs and ways of living from our own. We might respond negatively with prejudice, suspicion and intolerance or we might take one of a number of more positive positions:

- we could show attitudes of '**tolerance**', meaning that we accept the right of others to behave differently from ourselves even if we don't agree with them;
- we may show '**respect**' towards them, meaning we see value and positive elements in their beliefs and practices even if we do not share them;
- we may engage in '**intercultural dialogue**' with people of different cultures, exchanging views and being open to revising some of our own ideas in the light of the new meanings we learn from them.

- Are there any beliefs and practices belonging to different cultures that are not tolerated in the society where you live (or your school's community) and do you think that it is right to set these limits on what should be tolerated?
- Can you think of any ways in which your own ideas have been influenced by encounter with the beliefs and practices of people from other cultures?

## d) Citizenship and nationality

- What is your citizenship and what is your nationality? Are they the same?

Although someone might for example be French by nationality and a citizen of France, **citizenship** of a state and **nationality** do not always correspond. A state is a sovereign political entity with demarcated borders in which the rule of a government is sanctioned by law. The term 'citizenship' is used to refer to the legal status of belonging to a state and citizens have rights and obligations within that state. On the other hand a nation is a named human community with attachment to a historic homeland, which has a shared history, shared symbols, traditions and practices. Many nations do not at present have their own state or have been stateless at some time in their history. The Polish nation was an example of a stateless nation during the nineteenth century, when Poland was divided up between different states. Some, like England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the United Kingdom, are grouped together to participate in one state made from several nations.

- What are your rights as a citizen of a state and what are your obligations?
- Is the idea of nationality important to your identity? Explain why it is or isn't important.

## e) History and...

### ...(I) Culture

There are close associations between **history** and **culture**. A strong view of their relationship sees culture as the guardian of a heritage handed down by predecessors. That heritage could comprise a way of life, social and political organisation, a shared narrative, high culture such as art, music, literature, popular folklore and customs, symbols and icons including heroes from past ages. A less strong view would still find vestiges of the past in the current ways of living and thinking. When culture is seen as an embodiment of a heritage it often becomes a source of pride and sometimes of assertiveness seen for example in claims of cultural superiority, in demands for greater recognition for one's own culture, in the portrayal of a shared culture as something that needs to be preserved in the face of perceived threats.

- What are the cultural symbols and icons that have been used to construct your nation's 'national story'? What value do you think they have in today's world?

### ...(II) The 'other'

In encounters between cultures **the image of the 'other'** plays a crucial role and can encourage or hinder communication. To a large extent history shapes the image of the 'other' even before he or she is encountered. National history writing often conveys biased views of the author's own country or other countries. Histories of enmity or alliance between different nations, or of colonisation have a lasting influence on people's understanding and interpretation of the lives and cultures of other groups.

- Can you think of any national or cultural groups your views of which have been influenced by history? Does this historical perspective influence your willingness and ability to meet and get to know individuals from this group?

### ...(III) Citizenship

The concept of **citizenship** has had a varied history reflecting the changing contexts in which it has been used. In the city-states of the Ancient World the status of citizen was reserved for a minority of the population with political influence but also with responsibilities towards the rest of society. In revolutionary times, citizenship as a concept was used to demand an increasing involvement in political and civil society for previously excluded sectors of the population. As the world was divided into distinct political territories, citizenship was closely associated with belonging and

the status of citizen of a particular state or empire was used to claim rights (e.g. freedom, security, political participation and residence). Recent globalising trends are promoting a new form of citizenship that encourages a sense of belonging and of rights and responsibilities that transcend national and cultural boundaries.

- What rights and responsibilities do you now have as a citizen that your ancestors might not have had 300 years ago? Do you think you and your fellow citizens are better off through having these rights and responsibilities?
- What resources or reasons can history provide for intercultural communication?

## f) Multiple identities: interpreting the self

- Write ten words to define yourself. Divide them in two groups: 'I am...' and 'I am a...'. Compare your answer with the keywords of some of your classmates.

Individuals usually identify with more than one social group because they are simultaneously members of many different groups (national groups, racial groups, religious groups, gender groups, etc.); they have **multiple identities**. Identifying with multiple social groups helps us to position and define ourselves in the social world relative to other people.

When we attribute value and emotional significance to being a member of a particular social group, this group forms a salient part of our own self-concept (for example, being a Real Madrid supporter or being a Christian) and we acquire a subjective identification with that group.

The different groups we belong to are not always salient to us: for instance, nationality may be irrelevant if we are among fellow countrymen or women. However, identifications can become very salient when confronted with 'difference' of one kind or another (i.e. when travelling abroad, watching an international sporting event, or meeting somebody from another ethnic or religious group).

- Which of the social groups you identify with is/ are more important for you? Why do you think it is/ they are so important for you? What would you be prepared to do to assert your membership in that particular group(s)?
- Have you experienced any circumstance in which 'differences' between your social group(s) and the social group(s) of other(s) have made one (or more) of your multiple identities stand out? Have the 'differences' helped you understand yourself better?



## g) Perceptions of people from other cultures: interpreting the other

- Reflect upon how you viewed other cultures and people from other cultures when you were little and how you perceive other people and cultures now. Discuss whether your perceptions about others have changed and, if applicable, why you think they have changed.

The development of individuals' **perceptions of people from other cultures** happens during childhood and adolescence.

There is a great individual variation in the development of children's attitudes towards their own ethnic and national groups and in the development of their perceptions of others. Sometimes children's attitudes to people from other groups become more positive with increasing age; sometimes these attitudes become more negative; sometimes children and adolescents do not show any changes in their attitudes to people from other cultures with increasing age

Different factors influence the development of attitudes to people from other cultures:

- **Family discourse and practices** in relationship to cultural groups;
- **The contents of the school curriculum** (i.e. how issues related to racism and discrimination are covered);
- How cultural groups are represented in the **mass media**, especially television and cinema;
- **Personal contact** with individuals from other cultures.

- Reflect upon how you feel in connection with your own ethnic and national group. For each of the following categories, write five keywords to explain what you have learnt from them about your own national or ethnic group: a) family; b) school; c) mass media; d) personal contact with individuals from other cultures.

- Compare how you feel towards your own ethnic and national groups with how you feel in connection with different ethnic and national groups. Think of two groups to which you don't belong – what are your attitudes towards these groups and how have your attitudes been formed (e.g. from family, mass media, school, personal contact)?

## h) Functioning in the European context of plurality: plurilingualism

- Think about the languages you speak. Share with others in the group how and when you learnt them and what they mean to you.

**Plurilingualism** is the ability of individuals to use two or more languages to communicate and participate in intercultural interaction, which implies communicating with people from other cultures including those who share a strong cultural identity with you (e.g. a national or regional identity) but who differ from you at least in one of the following aspects: ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, social class, region, etc.

Plurilingualism entails that:

- individuals have a degree of competence in one or more foreign languages;
- individuals speaking 'the same' language are familiar with different varieties within it. For example, if your first language is English, you may consider how speaking English from the London area differs from English in Newcastle; similarly, you may also see British English in comparison with American, Australian or Indian English.

A plurilingual person has a varying degree of competence in different languages: you may master your mother tongue, have an intermediate command of one or two foreign languages and know only the basics in other languages.

- Do you consider yourself a plurilingual person? Read carefully the definition and reflect upon how the different elements of plurilingualism relate to you.
- Have you used your plurilingual skills to take part in intercultural communication? Think about examples in which speaking foreign languages or being familiar with different varieties of your first languages were key elements in your intercultural experiences.

## i) Functioning in the European context of plurality: pluriculturality and interculturality

A '**pluricultural**' person has the competences required to function within two or more cultures. Pluriculturality involves **identifying** with some of the values, beliefs and practices of two or more cultures, and **acquiring** the linguistic and behavioural competences necessary for participating in those cultures. Some pluricultural individuals are:

- the children born of mixed-parentage (who frequently observe the distinctive cultural heritages of both parents)
- minority youth whose ethnic culture is very distinct from the prevailing national peer culture (they frequently adopt ethnic values and practices within the family at

home and switch to the national peer culture outside the home)

**Interculturality** involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from (any) other cultures. Interculturality is the capacity to experience cultural otherness and use it to:

- reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one's own culture and environment;
- evaluate one's own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding;
- act as mediators among people of different cultures, to explain and interpret different perspectives.

Interculturality does **not** involve identifying with another cultural group or adopting the cultural practices of the other group.

- What do you think of the following statement?

*In European societies, where there are communities identified by different linguistic varieties and different cultures, one may be plurilingual without necessarily being pluricultural (...) while all speakers have a plurilingual repertoire, this does not necessarily make them aware of other cultures. Acquisition of a new linguistic variety provides an opportunity, but only an opportunity, to acquire some knowledge of other communities that use that variety. (Guide, 2003: 69. Strasbourg: Council of Europe)*

- Would you define yourself as a pluricultural person? Do you have friends or relatives you consider pluricultural? Justify your answer and illustrate it with examples.
- Do you think you are an intercultural person? Do you have friends or relatives you consider intercultural? Justify your answer and illustrate it with examples.

## j) Active citizenship and intercultural citizenship

- How would you define yourself: as a citizen of your town/region, as a citizen of your country, as a European citizen, as a citizen of the world? Discuss whether there is a type of citizenship you identify with most.

In order to participate in multicultural societies (see the definition of 'multicultural societies'), individuals need plurilingual and intercultural competences (see the definitions of 'plurilingualism', 'pluriculturality' and 'interculturality').

**Active citizenship** involves participating in community life according to one's rights and obligations. Active citizenship can take place at the local, regional, national and trans-national level.

Intercultural and plurilingual competences are required in the development of **active intercultural citizenship**. Active intercultural citizenship allows us to engage with other citizens (whether of the same state or other states) and carry out action in multicultural communities at the multiplicity of levels mentioned above (local, regional, national and trans-national).

- Comment on any instances in which you behaved as an active citizen of your school, region or nation (for example, fund raising for a charity).
- Have you had the chance to use your plurilingual and intercultural skills to show that you are an intercultural citizen? Add relevant examples or personal experiences.

