Introduction: The Forms of Intercultural Capital

Cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1986b) influentially argued, can be conceived in terms of three characteristic forms: in the objectified state—such as in writings, paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, tools, or machinery; in the institutionalized state—typically in the shape of official certifications provided by schools, colleges, and universities; and in the embodied state—as people's personal reservoir of cultural knowledge and know-how. Although not always explicit in Bourdieu's work, the respective forms of cultural capital only exist in relation to and through (different) cultures—here understood as pervious, evolving, more or less consciously learned, and more or less closely "shared" frames of perception, thought, and (inter)action that are both shaped by and shape their (histories of) objectification and institutionalization.

While it might be true that certain expressions of cultural learnedness—familiarity with "classic" music and literature, for example—constitute today less pertinent sources of sociocultural distinction than at the time when Bourdieu analyzed fields of struggle over (symbolic) power, little points at a more general decline in the (inter)personal and societal relevance of cultural capital. Quite to the contrary, in fact, countless research endeavors across cultural and disciplinary boundaries provide compelling evidence of the enduring explanatory value of "cultural capital variables". In an ever more interdependent world, intercultural capital emerges as an increasingly significant type of cultural capital and marker of sociocultural distinction. Its manifestations at the level of objectification include monuments with important intercultural connotations such as The Mother of Humanity® sculpture in Los Angeles (USA), the Way of Human Rights in Nuremberg (Germany), and the Monument to Multiculturalism in Toronto (Canada); international agreements or declarations with inherent intercultural dimensions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; commemorative days such as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on March 21, World Peace Day on September 21, or Human Rights Day on December 10th that are acknowledged across cultural boundaries around the globe; institutions and organizations with a strong intercultural underpinning (e.g., bi- or multilingual schools, intercultural universities, the European Court of Human Rights, or the United Nations); as well as books, articles, pamphlets, reports, speeches, and other academic or nonacademic publications with an intercultural outlook.

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With official endorsement, such objectified forms of intercultural capital can gain legitimacy and become more readily recognized across cultural boundaries. For instance, when Nuremberg received the UNESCO Prize for Human Rights Education, the aforementioned Way of Human Rights was internationally acknowledged as an important part of the city’s accomplishments—and thus decorated with a form of institutionalized intercultural capital. In a similar vein, institutions of formal education can enhance “ordinary” individual-level manifestations of embodied intercultural capital (e.g., language skills, intercultural friendships, or experiences of living abroad) through authoritative and lasting official testimonies and certifications.

Even if the *inter* in intercultural capital emphasizes the sphere of relationships and relationalities between (different) cultures, it deliberately does so without neglecting “cultural particularities”. In fact, all forms of intercultural capital are also forms of cultural capital in that they are particular to the cultures in relation to and through which they have emerged. And all forms of cultural capital are also forms of intercultural capital given that the cultures in relation to and through which they have emerged constitute, to a greater or lesser extent, a product of intercultural contact and “mixing”.

What distinguishes cultural and intercultural forms of capital is their relative degree of *field-transcendence*. For Bourdieu, capital, in its various forms, constitutes “an energy which only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 113) and, consequently, tends to lose force with increasing distance from the field(s) of its (re)production. Intercultural capital, to the contrary, functions as a potent marker of sociocultural distinction within a wider range of contexts of (re)production and is likely to retain, or indeed enhance, its exchange value when “moved” across more distant fields.

The focus of the present article lies on intercultural capital in the embodied state, which may, at first glance, appear as yet another linguistic variant of similar and already well-established terminologies such as *intercultural competence, intercultural communication skills, or intercultural sensitivity*. In fact, the notion of *embodied intercultural capital*—to which, for the remainder of this article, I will simply refer to as *intercultural capital*—expressly entails intercultural skills, competencies, and sensitivities. However, inspired by Bourdieu’s work, it does not solely relate to intercultural proficiencies as such, but also to their relative exchange value and the circumstances under which they are more or less likely to be realized.

The subsequent discussion first looks at the notion of “intercultural capital realization”, with a view on the benefits that it may bring about. It then moves on to illustrate why some people can be considered as better positioned to realize intercultural capital than others. The article proceeds with a focus on potential operational “measures” and promising areas of application in empirical research, before revisiting some important points by way of conclusion.

### Table 1. States of Intercultural Capital Realization.

| Not aware | Not acquired | Acquired | Applied |
|-----------|--------------|----------|---------|
| No realization | Acquisition | Acquisition and application |
| Awareness | Awareness and acquisition | Full realization |

### The Realization of Intercultural Capital and Its Potential Benefits

Intercultural capital can be realized in terms of a combination of awareness, acquisition, and application, as outlined in Table 1.

While the full realization of intercultural capital involves a certain degree of *awareness* of what may be at stake, the lack of it does not necessarily preclude effective acquisitions and applications, particularly in cases where people’s sociocultural environment favors habitual and largely taken-for-granted processes of capital embodiment.

The kinds of sociocultural environment in which intercultural capital may be acquired en passant, so to speak, can range from poorly financed state community centers in culturally diverse working class neighborhoods to lavish international management training programs for “global business leaders”. Even if the former source of intercultural capital acquisition is as such (i.e., in ontological terms) no less “valuable” than the latter, it is unlikely to be as highly prized, widely recognized, and easily convertible (i.e., into economic capital).

Because intercultural capital (as all cultural capital) tends to operate “as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital” (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 245), it can involve substantial financial profits even (or particularly) when these are not directly evident. But intercultural capital—when embodied in form of a more or less consciously learned and habituated intercultural know-how—as a practical intercultural sense, can offer more than a set of economically viable skills that allow their respective bearers to successfully compete in global markets. It can complement “original” cultural perspectives without imposing a need to abandon them in favor of assimilation to “new” ones. And by doing so, it may lead people to appreciate cultural diversity and develop an understanding for previously unfamiliar and perhaps “strange” situations and contexts.

As a solid body of research in the area of *intergroup contact theory* suggests, the kinds of personal encounter with extraordinary and previously unfamiliar customs, environments, people, or languages, which lie at the heart of the realization of intercultural capital, can render significant
(inter)personal and societal benefits (Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008; Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). Ever since Allport’s (1954) original qualifications, it is, however, also evident that intergroup contact in and by itself does not always and necessarily occur in, or lead to, harmonious intergroup relations where all (members of) different groups enjoy equal status and (symbolic) power (Barlow et al., 2012; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Maoz, 2000; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008).

Ultimately, the fact that, throughout human history, intercultural encounters have often been characterized by fierce conflict, war, and destruction rather than benevolence, consensus, and peace (Demorgon, 2005) reminds us of the importance of subjecting any presumed benefits of realizing intercultural capital to thorough empirical scrutiny. Before attending to issues of operationalization and empirical application, let us take a look at a number of interrelated factors that are likely to influence people’s chances of realizing intercultural capital and the benefits that it may bring about.

Who Is in a Position to Realize Intercultural Capital?

The realization of (inter)cultural capital is inherently “linked to the biological individual” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 157). Indeed, it always takes effect through somebody’s biologically mediated (history of) individual practice—including deliberate reflections as well as less conscious and often taken-for-granted “manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 43) or habitus. However, the likely extent of individual capital realization cannot be meaningfully evaluated based on the analysis of individual characteristics (e.g., age and gender) and practice alone, but is better thought of as the product of interrelated individual and environmental factors, as indicated in Figure 1.

People’s family background and upbringing no doubt play a crucial part in the course of their educational formation and throughout life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979). Those who can draw on a domestic inheritance of highly valued and widely convertible economic, social, and (inter)cultural capital will be more likely to accumulate highly prized and widely transferable varieties of intercultural capital, and take advantage of their accumulation, than others who do not enjoy such privileges (Pöllmann, 2009). But even in cases where a supportive and well-positioned family network provides access to “a share in the sum of the assets of all its members” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 292), the efficacy of people’s personal intercultural capital can still vary significantly—largely depending on their actual or perceived affiliation with ethnic, linguistic, national, racial, religious, or other groups—and particularly in a climate of group-specific domination and marginalization.

More than three decades ago, Hall (1976) pointed out that “the many gifts and talents of women, blacks, Native Americans, Spanish-Americans and others are not only unrecognized, but frequently denigrated by members of the dominant group” (p. 7). Today as in the 1970s, in the United States of America and elsewhere, group-specific “hierarchies” can have a detrimental impact on people’s opportunities in life, not only in circumstances of blatant exclusionism and discrimination (e.g., during the South African Apartheid regime), but also through more concealed forms of exclusion and disadvantage due to a lack of recognition of group-specific rights within “egalitarian societies” (Fraser, 1995; Kymlicka, 1995; Modood, 2007; Parekh, 2006; Young, 2011).

Essentially, members of marginalized groups can pursue three courses of action to enhance their chances of realizing intercultural capital: they can undertake to change their group affiliations; they can join into struggles over the recognition and appreciation of their particular (inter)cultural experiences and skills; or they can endeavor to challenge and change the often taken-for-granted practices and (unspoken)
rules that are sustained by and sustain established sociocultural divisions of (symbolic) power.

To be sure, as much as groups can be empowering, diverse, and open to change, they can be constraining, totalizing, and inflexible. But they hardly ever make up entirely homogeneous and fully unified wholes in which individual members amalgamate into a mysterious collective (Benhabib, 2004; Erel, 2010; Kymlicka, 2007; Parekh, 2008; Phillips, 2009). More often than not, different people will have different ideas about the meanings and purpose of the groups to which they (are perceived to) belong. They may feel strongly attached to some groups, while hardly taking notice of “objectively” existing links to others. They may dissociate themselves from previous group affiliations and, possibly, develop a desire to engage in new ones.

Group membership is, however, not in all instances, and not only, a matter of personal choice. If it was, it would indeed be fairly easy for people to change their respective affiliations and thus their relative chances of realizing intercultural capital. In fact, however, external evaluations of an individual’s (alleged) group membership(s) can persist even if they are at odds with his or her actual personal situation and choices. For those concerned, such a lack of “evaluative congruence” constitutes no trivial matter. As much as positive external evaluations can encourage and facilitate, negative stereotypes and prejudice can discourage and immobilize—particularly if they become internalized with effects on people’s self-perception and self-esteem (Taylor, 1994).

As it happens, people often choose to assert rather than to change their affiliations with different groups. Instead of renouncing group membership in the face of discrimination and marginalization, they see it as an important source of identity, pride, solidarity, and mutual empowerment. After all,

Social, economic and political equality are not provided on a platter. They have to be fought for and, what is just as difficult, sustained. This calls for a positive identity among the inferiorized groups, and hence a cultural struggle both within the groups and in the wider society. (Parekh, 2008, p. 50)

For (members of) inferiorized groups, a vital part of this struggle consists in affirming that it is much less a shortage of domestic and cultural resources that accounts for their marginalization, but the lack of sociocultural recognition and appreciation of these resources as legitimate and valuable—a point forcefully developed in various critiques of group-specific stereotyping and “deficit thinking” within the field of formal education (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005).

The prospects of individual or collective demands for the recognition and appreciation of a wider range of (hitherto marginalized) varieties of domestic and cultural resources will vary from context to context, and particularly across different states. As the holders “of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 239, italics in original), states represent a prime force in the shaping of sociocultural categorizations and divisions, be it explicitly and formally by authorizing legal provisions and laws (Bourdieu, 1986a), or less overtly, but often no less effectively, within other fields of struggle over (symbolic) power—including the realms of formal education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), language and communication (Bourdieu, 1991b), religion (Bourdieu, 1991a), and gender (Bourdieu, 2001).

Whenever the (symbolic) “power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world . . . its present meaning and the direction in which it is going and should go” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 185) is asymmetrically distributed, some individuals and groups will have more opportunities to accumulate intercultural capital than others. And even if they realize only comparatively little intercultural capital in terms of awareness and acquisition, its relative currency value—that is its realizability in terms of application—would still be likely to exceed that of others, whose personal stock of intercultural capital may be nominally larger, but is being greatly devalued by their unfavorable sociocultural positioning.

We will return to questions of realization and realizability in the concluding section. First, however, let us consider some ideas as to how possible operationalizations of the concept of intercultural capital may look like and across which types of research the respective empirical indicators might be applied. After all, theoretical concepts and propositions “are designed to be put to work empirically in systematic fashion” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96, italics in original) rather than to be treated as ends in themselves.3

Operational “Measures” and Areas of Application in Empirical Research

A recent survey on ( supra)national forms of attachment among school leaders in Berlin and London (Pöllmann, 2008, 2010) illustrates that intercultural capital—operationalized as a combination of the number of spoken foreign languages (“none”, “one”, or “two or more”), intercultural friendships (“none at all”, “a few”, or “several”), and experience of living abroad (“none”, “less than 1 year”, “1 to 4 years”, or “5 years or longer”)—can have a significant explanatory impact.4 The scope of these indicators could, no doubt, be further developed—particularly in terms of their analytic depth. For instance, in addition to considering whether and how long people say they have been living abroad, it would be interesting to also look at both the specific type of living experience (e.g., during holidays, in the course of an international student exchange program, or as the result of an international work placement) and the possible learning outcomes (e.g., indicated by the level of knowledge about another country before and after living abroad). In a similar vein, instead of merely focusing on the number of intercultural friends, one may dig deeper to learn
more about the sociocultural backgrounds of the respective friends and the subjectively perceived quality of their friendship.

Other possible operationalizations could take account of the different states of realization (i.e., Table 1); the degree of field-transcendence; the length of acquisition, which Bourdieu (1986b) conceived as “the least inexact of all the measurements of cultural capital” (p. 244); and the mode of acquisition, considering direct personal experiences (e.g., through intercultural marriage or international migration) as well as more indirect forms of intercultural learning (e.g., via books, television, or the Internet)—bearing in mind that “mediate, knowing acquisition will always differ from an immediate familiarity with the native culture” (Bourdieu, 1967, p. 358).

In the end, the number and complexity of operational “measures” for the concept of intercultural capital will vary depending on the specific subject under consideration and the respective theories and methods employed in the course of its investigation. A comparative cross-national survey project on people’s intercultural experiences and skills, for example, is unlikely to involve the same set of empirical indicators as an in-depth ethnographic study of intercultural encounters within a particular local community. Apart from its practical necessity, such flexibility at the level of operationalization prevents from limiting the notion of intercultural capital to a singular (essentialized) set of connotations and, by doing so, allows it to appeal across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

The concept of intercultural capital lends itself to various promising empirical applications—both as an explanatory factor and as a phenomenon to be explained. When considered as an explanatory factor, its potential impact could be examined in relation to a range of contemporary social problems, such as ethnocentrism, racism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia. When treated as a phenomenon to be explained, its relative degree of realization in terms of awareness, acquisition, and application (i.e., Table 1) could be taken into account and examined as a function of any one or a combination of the factors outlined in Figure 1.

In quantitative social research, empirical “measures” of intercultural capital could serve as predictors of educational success (Nuñez, 2009), transnational employability, or attitudes toward cultural diversity, foreigners, ethnic minorities, and immigrants—to name only a few possible examples. At present, however, the necessary large-scale survey data are relatively scarce. The regular incorporation of “intercultural capital variables” in cross-national survey programs such as the European Social Survey, the World Values Survey, or the International Social Survey Programme would largely enhance the analytical scope of quantitative social research, including possibilities for multilevel data analyses and systematic comparisons over time.

While statistical analyses of survey data are particularly well suited to examine the relative explanatory value of “intercultural capital variables”, more interpretive social research strategies (e.g., life history interviews, participatory observation, or focus group interviews) allow for further and more in-depth insights—not only into how the embodiment of intercultural capital may affect people’s lives, but also on factors that may enable or constrain its realization (i.e., Figure 1) in terms of awareness, acquisition, and application (i.e., Table 1).

Whether treated as an explanatory factor or as a phenomenon to be explained, the notion of intercultural capital is neither exclusively suited to qualitative applications nor solely reserved to be used in the context of quantitative analyses. Indeed, to apply the concept across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, and to take full advantage of its heuristic potential, requires problem-oriented research strategies rather than rigid theoretical frameworks and methodological fetishisms.

Having introduced the forms of intercultural capital, emphasized the particular significance of embodied intercultural capital—its potential benefits, as well as factors that may enable or constrain its realization—and discussed possible applications at the level of empirical research, I would like to conclude this article with a brief outlook on some earlier points.

**Conclusion**

The realization of intercultural capital can, no doubt, help people of various backgrounds to develop a practical intercultural sense for the globally interconnected world which they inhabit—and by doing so pave the way for considerable (inter)personal and societal benefits. In many places around the world, however, the most highly esteemed, institutionally certified, and (thus) most widely convertible types of intercultural capital are being realized by the few rather than the many. Even within the comparatively prosperous and enabling context of the European Union, the kind of interculturally mobile lifestyles, which can be expected to facilitate the realization of intercultural capital, are overproportionately associated with higher levels of socioeconomic status and majority ethno-racial backgrounds (Fligstein, 2008; Haller, 2008; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Taking into consideration that those who have already realized comparatively high levels of highly valued and widely convertible (officially recognized) intercultural capital are likely to realize even more of it with more ease, such systematic inequalities may well exacerbate rather than diminish over time.

As we have seen, whether and how easily intercultural capital can be realized is neither simply a question of luck or good fortune, nor primarily the result of differences in individual characteristics and efforts. It depends to an important extent on a range of environmental factors. The more, for instance, domestic capital resources, group memberships, and the respective field conditions favor a habitual, effortless, and largely taken-for-granted embodiment of highly prized and widely convertible intercultural capital, the more
awareness is relatively dispensable. In comparatively less favorable circumstances, on the contrary, conscious individual or collective struggles for recognition, appreciation, and a more equal distribution of (symbolic) power become all the more important.

As long as large parts of the world remain ridden with profound sociocultural inequalities, it would be naïve, or at least premature, to mistake processes of intercultural capital realization and their possible (inter)personal and societal benefits for the dawn of a new age of “intercultural personhood”. Instead, to avoid undue generalizations and rushed conclusions, both the conditions and potential impact of intercultural capital embodiment are best conceived in terms of degree and probability, where different people can be considered as more or less likely to (be able to) possess so and so much intercultural capital, of this or that empirical variety, at different points of realization, and of more or less widely transferable (institutionally certified) currency value.

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Notes

1. Recent examples include Bennett et al. (2009), Noble & Davies (2009), Shim (2010), Tramonte & Willms (2010), and Yamamoto & Brinton (2010).

2. See Perry & Southwell (2011) for an overview of the current mainstream of (entirely or primarily) communication and/or skill-oriented approaches that operate under the labels of “intercultural competence”, “intercultural understanding”, “intercultural sensitivity”, “intercultural communication”, and “intercultural training”, among others. Notable exceptions to this mainstream do exist – for example within the area of critical intercultural communication studies (e.g., Halualani & Nakayama, 2010).

3. Contrary to the false impression created by some critics (e.g., Goldthorpe, 2007), Bourdieu conceived (his) concepts not as absolute, rigid, and purely theoretical frames of reference, but as analytical “tools” that, when applied in empirical research, quite naturally need to be adapted to do justice to the particular problem(s) under consideration (e.g., Bourdieu, 1988, 1999; Lamaison & Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 1989).

4. In particular, the respective results suggest that higher levels of intercultural capital are associated with lower levels of national attachment and with higher levels of attachment to Europe.

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