

Sustainability and ethnic peace discourse: in search for synergies from bringing together discourses on intercultural communication and on global sustainability

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**Abstract:** In political discourse, the notion of sustainability frames a worldwide debate on how to ensure future constructive development on a global scale. Decades ago, the finiteness of natural reserves firstly initiated an awareness for the need of sustainable economic development. Recently, political agendas on sustainability and sustainable development also comprise the pillar of social sustainability. While intercultural understanding is seen as a necessary condition to ensure social sustainability, a corresponding concept of the sustainability of intercultural understanding has not been elaborated any further, yet. This article fleshes out the normative frameworks of the political discourse on sustainability. It will then explore the contemporary field of intercultural communication research to find out in what ways the existing research can contribute to specify the role of intercultural understanding in sustainability discourse. Centrally, potential normative orientations underlying intercultural communication theory and research need to be identified to build a bridge to the normative discourse on sustainability.

**Keywords:** sustainability, intercultural communication, intercultural understanding, normative orientation

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*Discours sur la durabilité et la paix ethnique : à la recherche de synergies alliant les discours sur la communication interculturelle et sur la durabilité globale*

**Résumé :** Dans le discours politique, la notion de durabilité encadre un débat international sur la manière d'assurer un développement futur constructif à l'échelle

mondiale. Il y a plusieurs décennies, la finitude des réserves naturelles a fait prendre conscience pour la première fois de la nécessité d'un développement économique durable. Depuis peu, les programmes politiques sur la durabilité et le développement durable incluent également le pilier de la durabilité sociale. Alors que la compréhension interculturelle est perçue comme une condition nécessaire à la durabilité sociale, on n'a pas encore approfondi la notion de durabilité interculturelle. Cet article vient étoffer les cadres normatifs du discours politique sur la durabilité, pour ensuite explorer le domaine contemporain de la recherche en communication interculturelle dans le but de savoir de quelles manières la recherche existante peut contribuer à préciser le rôle de la compréhension interculturelle dans le discours sur la durabilité. Il est essentiel d'identifier les orientations normatives potentielles sous-tendant la théorie et la recherche concernant la communication interculturelle pour concilier celles-ci avec le discours normatif sur la durabilité.

**Mots-clés :** durabilité, communication interculturelle, compréhension interculturelle, normatif

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores potential synergies that may arise from bringing together intercultural communication research and the political discourse on global sustainability. Although only very few authors have considered these synergies so far (e.g. Kimmel, 1995), facing them with each other may help to fill some of their weaknesses on a mutual basis: Intercultural communication research is facing growing concerns in terms of its underlying normative and moral orientations. Conversely, political sustainability discourse until today tends to neglect the importance of social and ethnic peace for ensuring global growth.

### 1.1. *Ethnic peace discourse will need to argue for change*

Ethnic peace from the perspective of social and political research tends to be seen as a general and unquestioned norm, writes Kaufman (2006, p. 47). While ethnic conflict has been analysed in detail and in numerous case studies, in contrast, ethnic peace very often goes unquestioned – and undescribed – as a point of departure for exploring outbreaks of ethnic conflict (Kaufman, 2006, p. 56). Kaufman (2006, p. 50) resumes that this attitude bases on people's common agreement that peace should be preferred to violence.

Baraldi specifies that globalization as a prerequisite platform for active ethnic peace (in contrast to mere mutual insulation) bases on communication (Baraldi, 2006, p. 53). From this perspective, interethnic dialogue as a communication-based activity is an adequate tool for preserving ethnic peace and for preventing ethnic conflict.

Instead of intercultural dialogue, Malmvig (2005) for the example of the Mediterranean region shows that security discourses tend to replace what had been the-

matized in discourses on intercultural dialogue beforehand. These observations may speak for a growing public and academic disappointment in what intercultural dialogue has on offer.

It may be concluded that societies tend to resign from the notion of healing ethnic conflict by its own means (i.e. interethnic understanding). Instead, the coercion of power seems to be considered the only promising solution. However, power inequalities, in reverse, can be seen as one of the main sources for conflict. As a consequence, solving the problem of ethnic conflict by means of interethnic understanding should be continued to be the preferred form of managing the issue.

### *1.2. Intercultural communication research neglects promoting the potential of intercultural understanding*

Intercultural communication can be seen as a subject for academic research that has been covered extensively by numerous disciplines over the past decades. Piller (2011, p. 33) locates the origins of intercultural communication research in studies revealing the influence of culture on interactions between individuals (Piller as an example here refers to Hall and Hall 1987). These undertakings start from the assumption that cultural differences significantly affect the modes of human communication and interaction and that these differences generally go unnoticed for the interactants. Many disciplines from the social sciences have joined analyzing this phenomenon. Today, extensive handbooks document these engagements, as for example from the fields of ethnography and cultural anthropology (Asante, Miike & Yin, 2014), social psychology (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002), linguistics and communication (Jackson, 2012), and critical and postcolonial theory (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010). All the handbooks mentioned here carry the term of intercultural communication even in their title.

After the emergence of the topic as a field of research, permanent critique on the basis of academic reason has contributed to a vast sophistication of the previous core concern. In particular, previous assumptions of culture as an essentialist given have been revealed as a discursive construction that intercultural communication research should not adopt as its own premise but that it should transcend from the start. Notions of culture are continuously constructed by researchers as well as by practitioners, and at the same time, these construction processes are subject to ideological and political orientations (Dervin 2016, 2). Accordingly, Piller (2011, 132) considers academia's and society's handling of culture and intercultural communication as part of discourse: It is not only culture that is assumed to emerge via discourse, but the (academic) subject of intercultural research in itself is a discursive construction, too.

From its beginning, intercultural communication research is conceived as a practice-oriented discipline building on normative premises. Leeds-Hurwitz (2010, p. 28) in her historical overview quotes cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead (1953, p. 76) claiming "the urgent need to devise better methods of co-operation between national groups and within national groups which are torn by regional, class, or

ideological conflicts". After WW2, cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall was employed at the U.S.'s Foreign Service Institute FSI to teach and to prepare diplomats and development technicians for their stay abroad. Hall experienced that his trainees hardly considered general information about other cultures as useful. What they seemed to need instead was an insight into how they experience cultural difference in their own interpersonal interaction – and how they can manage it (Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 9).

This short summary may suggest that a strong normative orientation is one of the core premises of intercultural communication research throughout. However, contemporary critics challenge the effectiveness of this claim: Migration researcher Mark Terkessidis (2010, p. 55) complains that societies do neither really know how to deal with cultures, nor do they lead a constructive discussion steering towards some answers to that question. As a consequence, there is a huge general disorientation, aimlessness, and helplessness.

Furthermore, intercultural communication research has for long cultivated a strong problem-orientation highlighting challenges while neglecting phenomena of successful intercultural interaction (cf. the respective criticism in Koole and ten Thije, 1994, p. 68). Even worse, this problem-orientation perpetuates what the discipline actually wants to overcome: Abdallah-Preteille (2006, p. 476) terms this orientation as "differentialism".

### *1.3. Sustainability discourse as a political platform for the discussion of global change*

Normative orientations cannot arise from academic descriptive analysis, directly. Instead, they are the products of moral thinking that builds on the preferences of a society's majority. As a consequence, normative orientations are the objects of political argumentation and competition. Currently, the thematic field of sustainability can be seen as one of the central domains contributing to a debate on global normative orientations. Duxbury and Kangas confirm that sustainability is "a complex set of visions for the future of humanity" (Duxbury & Kangas, 2017, p. 214). And in a similar vein, Rödel (2016, p. 116) adds that the semantic invention of the term *sustainability* is of global historic reach and weight. *Sustainability* should thus be seen as the first genuine cosmopolitan term of humankind.

### *1.4. Ethnic peace discourse is currently neglected in the debate on sustainability*

Conflict, and violent conflict in particular, is an obvious hindrance to social development and growth. Accordingly, peace, and ethnic peace amongst other dimensions, can be seen as a precondition for development. Considering the global discourse on sustainability and sustainable development, it might be surprising that the aspects of ethnic peace and intercultural understanding seem to be somewhat neglected, yet. To fill this gap, some specification on the issue will be needed. While the promotion of sustainability might be seen as a political issue, elaborations of the field will need to be developed and delivered by academia.

## 2. Sustainability discourse as a political motor for social change

### 2.1. *The political genesis of the sustainability project*

The use of the terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* in the field of politics must be seen as a discourse. Accordingly, notions of what sustainability is about will need to be seen as discursive constructions. Constructions in discourse cannot be traced back to one single and unitary definition. Instead, discursive emergences of phenomena imply that their notions and definitions are under permanent discussion and negotiation. Furthermore, discourse takes place in a context of existing power imbalances. Participants to a discourse will try to make strategic use of their interpretations to modify power imbalances to their own advantage (Fairclough, 1989).

Following this insight, the discursive construction of the sustainability debate must be acknowledged in this article, too. Respectively, the genesis of the sustainability debate cannot be reported on in a linear and fixed line-up of a selection of single steps. In fact, contemporary publications within the sustainability debate frequently use such a narration of a history of the sustainability movement. In the lights of discourse theory, however, these outlines will need to be considered as active reconstructions of a history in retrospective. As a consequence, these reconstructions will also reflect the interpretive views of selected parties of the discourse. In other words, narrations on the history of the sustainability movement will be prone to ethnocentric perspectives:

In 1972, the Club of Rome presented a declaration on “The Limits to Growth” (Meadows et al., 1972) thematizing the looming finiteness of natural reserves. In response to this, the declaration called for an economic development that takes this finiteness into consideration instead of pursuing pure economic growth (Throsby, 2008, p. 15).

In 1987, the United Nations’ *World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)* has published its – retrospectively termed – *Brundtland Report* specifying the goals of what since then increasingly has been promoted as a sustainable development of the economic, ecological and social field (WCED 1987; cf. Soini & Birkeland, 2014, p. 213).

In 1992, sustainable development for the first time has been officially declared and claimed as a goal of global relevance and reach (Duxbury & Gillette, 2007, p. 21) in the aftermath of the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006).

Although this reconstruction of a linear development may make us believe in a linear and unanimous emergence of the sustainability concept, Robinson (2004) emphasizes that this homogeneity is nothing but an (intended) illusion. From the beginning, there has been a vivid and multifaceted discourse on what sustainability goals may consist of and how they can be reached. Robinson says that the notion of sustainability holds a “constructive ambiguity” (Robinson, 2004, p. 374). The ex-

treme vagueness of the term results in an advantage for the movement: It is open for further debate and development. On the basis of a diachronic and semantic analysis of the term *sustainability*, Rödel (2013) confirms that in fact, its extreme openness is one of the core characteristics of the sustainability concept.

Even more, the perspective of critical theory adds that concepts like *sustainability* always run the risk of being undermined by hidden and counterproductive effects and strategies.

### 2.2. Sustainability discourse: From mere economics towards a holistic concept

Since then, the sustainability movement has widened its scope. For the example of Germany, Moosmüller and Schönhuth (2009, p. 222-223) highlight that society and politics have placed a considerable emphasis on the sociocultural dimension of international development and human rights. In fact, sustainability in the German discourse is still a topic that is fairly alive as a number of recent publications show (e.g. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2014; Hauff, 2014).

However, these social dimensions of the sustainability debate have experienced their strongest criticism as being formulated from a eurocentric viewpoint. Instead, approaches from all parts of the world should equally be considered. Accordingly, the Western world's claim to know the right way will need to be challenged (cf. Tehranian, 2014, p. 435).

This de-ethnocentrized perspective is even more paramount since sustainability discourse formulates claims of global reach and validity. However, so far, sustainability movements are seldom tied to a global level although it is obvious that local or regional efforts will be fruitless (Klessig & Hagengruber, 1999; Lewis, 2003; Ketola, 2009).

Besides from this danger of ethnocentrism, Soini and Birkeland (2014) resume the general openness of potential relationships between culture and sustainability. The authors start from the observation that there is an "obvious semantic connection between 'culture' and 'sustainability'" (Soini & Birkeland, 2014, p. 214) that still lacks any further definition and that, therefore, invites for permanent associative thinking and dreaming. Even more, not only *sustainability* is a very open and multifaceted concept, but the same is the case with *culture*, too. In conclusion, what Soini and Birkeland (2014) explore as a concept of cultural sustainability receives even more flexibility than the original concept of sustainability.

Beyond the mere fact of receiving a multiplicity of potential combinations of culture and sustainability, considering sustainability in the light of culture may add more openness to sustainability: In general, accepting cultural diversity will entail that we will necessarily have to accept a huge (cultural) diversity of (competing) concepts on sustainability.

### 2.3. *Sustainability documents approaching issues of ethnic peace*

Only recently, political sustainability discourse has begun considering the necessity of actively ensuring future intercultural understanding. Accordingly, in 2009, the *United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization UNESCO* has pointed out that intercultural dialogue is a crucial pillar for the pursuit of global sustainable development. Respectively, one of their aims is “to persuade decision-makers and the various stakeholders of the importance of investing in cultural diversity as an essential dimension of intercultural dialogue, since it can renew our approaches to sustainable development, ensure the effective exercise of universally recognized human rights and freedoms, and strengthen social cohesion and democratic governance” (UNESCO, 2009 p.1).

As another step, the United Nations Organization in 2015 has published its memorandum on *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015). The agenda analytically distinguishes as many as 200 specified goals from many different areas of political, economic, social and ecological life. As a general orientation, the agenda – amongst many other things – promotes intercultural understanding:

“We pledge to foster intercultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015 p.13).

However, the list of more precise goals then blurs the notion of intercultural understanding. It is put in the service of the preservation of peace:

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015 p.21).

### 2.4. *Pleas are too vague and too passive to initiate change*

Although the need for intercultural understanding now seems to be a facet of sustainability discourse, the declarations still do not specify how this new goal should be reached. Accordingly, if any specification should be made in the future, research on the field by its nature should be seen as the most competent contributor on this behalf. For the time being, the mere call for securing intercultural understanding still has a very passive character, and it does not indicate any directions to follow.

Respectively, intercultural understanding needs to be actively promoted and encouraged to ensure its sustainability. Indeed, letting the acclaimed fuzziness of the discipline aside, the discourse on intercultural communication is full of visions and

pleas. In contrast to this, however, there seems to be a lack of rationales integrating visionary orientations into social research.

Pursuing visions and improving the world is not only an optional occupation but instead, it is people's responsibility to drive their world towards a good and constructive future, says Kimmel (1995, 102). However, since people basically are able to change everything, for the time being, they rather tend to make use of their potential in a destructive way and instead neglect their creative and their constructive potential.

Furthermore, visions on how to design intercultural communication are indispensable since contemporary concepts of intercultural competence do not reach far enough, say Cortés and Wilkinson (2015). The latter mostly being designed as static models, they will not provide actors in the intercultural field with the potential to develop constructive visions on how to arrange intercultural interaction. A visionary competence, instead, will be dynamic, under permanent change and growing on the basis of an actor's individual experience. In other words, constructive intercultural understanding in many cases can reach its peaks – just and in particular – when transcending the scopes of scientific frameworks and relying on human intuition, instead.

Integrating these ambitions into social theory may help making visions more precise, checking a vision's feasibility as well as its consequences. Even more, social theory may deliver more precise steps on what has to be done in order to implement the interculturalists' visions. Seen from this perspective, social theory may be divided into different strands offering divergent assessments on the autonomy of individuals and their actions. As the third chapter of this article will show, the tradition of critical rationalism will agree subjects a relatively wide range of autonomy whereas, in comparison, postmodernist thinking tends to see subjects more constrained and embedded into complex social dynamics.

### *2.5. Sustainability discourse as a basis for the normative development of other disciplines*

To sum up, the field of intercultural research currently provides in-depth insights into the subject, and it may also produce normative recommendations for future action. However, this academic field is lacking a systematics that would be necessary in order to transform these results into a basis for effective future global action. Here, sustainability discourse may come into play: The political debate on sustainability today may be understood as a platform for the formulation of future global orientations. At the same time, it remains very open in terms of the contents that should be promoted. Figure 1 illustrates that in these respects, sustainability discourse on the one side and intercultural communication research on the other side may complement each other:

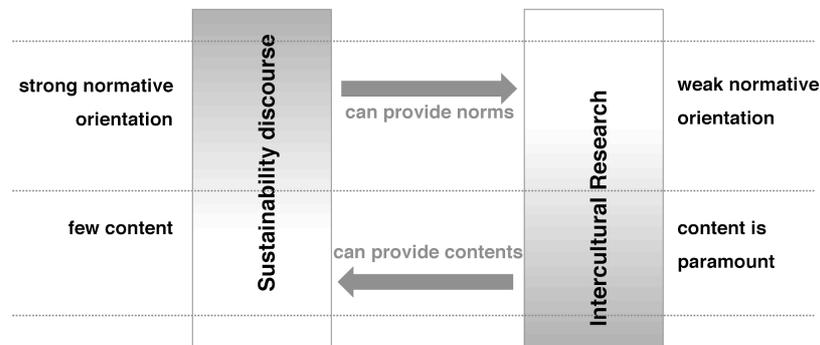


Figure 1. A mutual complementation of sustainability discourse and intercultural research

### 3. Joining sustainability discourse will require an awareness of paradigms

A precise transformation of the normative orientations of sustainability discourse onto the field of intercultural communication will require a concise revelation of the norms underlying sustainability discourse at first place. As Rödel (2013) points out, sustainability discourse is not based upon an existing normative long-term tradition. As a consequence, details and systematics of the norms underlying that discourse cannot be but analyzed and depicted retrospectively – as it is done by Rödel taking a linguistic approach. Rödel (2013) in particular confirms that the concept of sustainability on the one hand is a normative concept that is used to formulate global future orientations. On the other hand, even by its semantic concept, it is very open for change, modification, elaboration.

#### 3.1. The openness of sustainability discourse as a challenge

The radical openness of the sustainability debate may lead to two conclusions if we consider the role of intercultural understanding in this context: First, there is a fundamental right to propose additional components to the sustainability debate. However, this fundamental right does not imply that a proposal will be accepted by all participants in a debate. Instead, proposals may be critically discussed and some of them may be fully rejected – even as a result of unfavorable power asymmetries. Sustainability needs to be understood as a permanent debate on means and goals – at best on a global level. Second, any new proposal to the sustainability debate will not only need to introduce into a new thematic field of action but it will also need to provide clear normative orientations and claims – that may then be discussed within the sustainability debate. Apart from these theory-based challenges, future concepts may be contested in their implementation into practice, too:

“A difficulty with this approach is that it is unclear how not yet existing rights can be binding for us right now. If we have obligations towards present people because of their present interests, it does not automatically follow that we also have obligations towards persons who will have interests or rights in the future. Those future rights cannot be violated today, since they do not exist yet. There seems to be a missing link in the argumentation” (Unruh, 2016, p. 79).

For the case of intercultural understanding as a contribution provided by intercultural communication research, these conclusions imply that the field will not only need to provide insights into the results of its empirical research. Instead, it will also need to provide normative orientations, respectively. Formulating these normative orientations in an explicit way may not always have been paramount to intercultural research. For the subject of intercultural understanding, this exigence may be even more challenging. Norms will not only need to elicit what should be done. Since intercultural understanding is an interactive phenomenon embracing at least two parties, there will always be the open question of how far something should be paired and done. Any contribution to an interactive dialogue will necessarily need to be seen as an intervention to other participants’ autonomies.

Ethnic peace can be promoted by means of many different tools and disciplines. Here, the example of intercultural communication research is presented to show how an awareness of paradigms can turn a field of research into a sustainability discipline.

### 3.2. *Basic normative orientations in intercultural research*

Although what may be termed as *intercultural sustainability* (Busch 2016) promises to be a fruitful concept, it starts as an idea still waiting for its academic foundation. Even if the sustainability of intercultural understanding for sure is a normative concept (although a very open one), moral philosophy will necessarily lay the ground for its development. For the case of intercultural understanding in particular, approaches from social theory provide very different foundations on what may and should be done to ensure global peace across cultures – and how far this should be done. As a consequence, even actual applications of intercultural sustainability will take on very different shapes, depending on, for example, they are based on positivist, postmodernist, critical rationalist or systems grounds.

This article will explore a selection of these approaches from social theory to intercultural sustainability. It will at the same time evaluate these approaches for the scopes of action that these approaches agree to their actors. Doing so, the authors will rely upon their critical reading of central and seminal approaches from the field of intercultural communication. This critical reading aims at preliminary checks on whether normative orientations that can be found in the literature elsewhere do emerge in works on intercultural research, too. As a next step, a more systematic analysis will be required building upon this first exploration.

### 3.3. *The genesis of research traditions in intercultural research*

Insights into the potential foundations of intercultural sustainability within social theory may help developing positive and normative concepts and at the same time providing them with a sound basis in academic debate.

Kim (2001) departs from the observation that there are four methodological approaches to intercultural communication research. Kim terms them as *neopositivist*, *systems*, *interpretive* and *critical approaches*. Besides that, intercultural research primarily deals with five different themes – as Kim calls them. Kim mentions the themes of *intrapersonal processes in intercultural communication*, *intercultural communication competence*, *adaptation to a new culture*, *cultural identity in intercultural contexts* and *power inequality in intercultural relations*. These intercultural themes are complemented by the two themes of *emic approaches to cultural communication* and *etic approaches to cross-cultural communication*. In actual research, combinations of one or more of these methods and one or more of these themes may result in a theory on intercultural communication. In practice, some of these combinations have been explored more than others, and their resulting theories have become more seminal for the field than others.

In this article, Kim does not tie these theory clusters back to normative orientations. However, she had provided a systematics of normative orientations in an earlier writing (Kim, 1988). Then, Kim explains that theories on (intercultural) communication build upon different meta-theoretical assumptions that are normative in their nature. More precisely, Kim speaks of a *positivist* tradition where theories aim at revealing the predictability of communication. Theories basing on a *humanist* tradition aim at uncovering ways to communicative understanding. The *systems* approach as a third tradition promotes both the goals of predictability and understanding.

### 3.4. *Normative paradigms underlying intercultural research*

Möller-Kiero and Busch (2017) have advanced this approach focusing on norms to be charged to interactants in intercultural contact: They revealed underlying norms on what people in intercultural communication should do and what they should not do. In contrast, Kim's list of normative traditions had rather focused on what insights research should provide to the phenomenon of intercultural communication.

Möller-Kiero and Busch conclude that normative orientations to the intercultural actor can be traced back to six different traditions, i.e. *positivist*, *humanist*, *critical-rationalist*, *constructivist*, *systemic* and *postmodernist* orientations. Table 1 presents the results of an analysis checking Kim's (2001) thematic and methodical approaches to intercultural research for their underlying normative paradigms according to the scheme by Möller-Kiero and Busch (2017). The results show that generally, any theme and any method can be approached on the basis of any normative paradigm. Research and publication practice of the past few decades, however, shows that

clusters of certain combinations of themes, methods and normative paradigms can be identified whereas other combinations have been neglected.

**Table 1.** Identifying normative paradigms underlying intercultural communication research at the example of the categories by Kim (2001)

<b>Research themes in intercultural communication according to Kim (2001, p. 141-149)</b>	<b>Methodological approaches to intercultural communication according to Kim (2001, p. 141)</b>	<b>Normative paradigms underlying intercultural research according to Möller-Kiero and Busch (2017)</b>
intrapersonal processes in intercultural communication (stereotypes, ethnocentrism, prejudices)	neopositivist (convergence/divergence)	
	systems (Kim)	systemic approaches
	interpretive (van Dijk)	
intercultural communication competence	neopositivist (culture-general social psychology)	humanist approaches
	neopositivist and interpretive (identity negotiation)	positivist approaches
adaptation to a new culture	systems (Kim: adaptation as a dialectic process)	systemic approaches
cultural identity in intercultural contexts	neopositivist (identity as a monolithic bloc)	positivist approaches
	systems (Kim, Casmir: identity is flexible and complex)	systemic approaches

	interpretive (identity as a monolithic bloc)	critical-rationalist approaches
	critical (identity as a monolithic bloc)	postmodernist approaches
power inequality in intercultural relations	critical (as a meta-perspective for all other methods)	postmodernist approaches
emic approaches to intercultural communication	interpretive (relativist, refraining from theorizing, culture as a stable meaning system)	postmodernist / critical rationalist approaches
etic approaches to cross-cultural communication	neopositivist (e.g. culture-general cultural dimensions)	positivist approaches

### 3.5. The positivist paradigm as a norm for intercultural research

*Positivist* orientations in intercultural research assume that research can immediately see, describe and measure what is going on in intercultural communication. As Kim had noted already, enhancing predictability is one of the central goals of research here. In fact, positivist approaches pass this option on to the actors in intercultural research. They should be able to cope with interculturality because they may learn to anticipate the ways in which other people communicate. Positivist approaches have by far the longest tradition in intercultural research, and thus, they outnumber all other normative traditions in this field until today.

Positivist approaches can be found in many of Kim's (2001) fields of intercultural research, respectively. In this context, what Möller-Kiero and Busch term *positivist approaches* to normative behavior of intercultural actors largely matches Kim's (2001) category of *neopositivist* attitudes in research. Accordingly, positivist norms for action for example are produced for the focus on intrapersonal processes in intercultural communication. Here, dimensions like those of convergence vs divergence as well as orientations like stereotyping, ethnocentrism and prejudice (cf. Biernat, Sesko & Amo, 2009) help making intercultural communication predictable. Similarly, the topic of intercultural competence has been analyzed under positivist premises as for example by means of social psychological theories on identity negotiation (cf. Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Finally, Kim's research field of *etic approaches to cross-cultural communication* so far has been dominated by positivist pursuits. Compared to other normative bases for intercultural interaction, positivist approaches grant the rights for a wide scope of action and intervention to intercultural

tural actors. Intercultural communication, accordingly, is something manageable, and thus, intercultural actors should just observe and internalize the other's modes of communication. Critics to this approach warn that it is prone to ethnocentrism.

### 3.6. *The humanist paradigm as a norm for intercultural research*

*Humanist* groundings of normative orientations in intercultural research can be traced back to 19th century's assumptions on human universality. Accordingly, all people were considered equal human beings, and as a consequence, interpersonal understanding was considered possible in any case. Cultural differences that might oppose this human unity should be transcended. Humanist assumptions in intercultural research in particular can be found in concepts of intercultural competence: individuals here are called on to surmount cultural difference. At the same time, the universalist assumptions of humanism suppose that intercultural understanding will be possible in any situation (cf. Straub 2009, p. 222). This assumption is shared by many communication-centered models of intercultural relations implying the claim that solutions to any problem can be reached by means of (universal) communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2014, p. 18). Accordingly, concepts of intercultural dialogue (for a criticism cf. Asante, 1980, p. 401) as well as third spaces/cultures (Casmir, 1993) and hybridities (Bhabha, 1994) receive their motivational forces from humanist groundings. The recent school of *transhumanism* (Lilley, 2013) explores the potential of any technological enhancements to restore human unity as for example interaction and understanding supported by virtual media.

### 3.7. *The critical-rationalist paradigm as a norm for intercultural research*

*Critical rationalism* is a line of thought that is largely tied to the philosophical works of Karl Popper (1959). According to him, individuals will never be able to overlook a social context in its full complexity. As a consequence, people will be required to accept that they will need to base their decisions and their actions on incomplete information. Since there are many situations that morally require participants to actively participate and interact (instead of waiting for more information and observations), critical rationalism encourages them to do so. Their actions may remain valid and right until they will be proven wrong on the basis of better information. For individuals in intercultural situations this may mean that they are allowed to engage in interactions in ways that they may feel appropriate as long as they are not proven wrong. Such a potential proof should then initiate individuals to modify their strategies. In intercultural research, critical rationalist underpinnings can be derived as normative bases for action for example from studies on interactive identity negotiations as well as from some emic approaches to cultural communication. The relatively recent approach of interculturalism (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006) may be seen as a prominent example of putting critical rationalism into practice by focusing on meso and macro levels of social life including economic and political action (Jiang, 2006). Furthermore, this recent paradigm of interculturalism is based on an understanding of dynamic culture(s), shared actions and the need to share a common will(ingness) of growing together within a world community.

### 3.8. *The constructivist paradigm as a norm for intercultural research*

*Constructivist* positions in research, in contrast, are more relativist in their assessments of individuals' agreed scope of action. Departing from the radically interpretive nature of human communication, constructivists underline that individuals create their own singular views and understandings of their lifeworlds. Although these constructions are fed by individuals' experiences from participating in social discourse, each individual's constructions will be unique. Their commonalities will not exceed a lowest common denominator that is absolutely needed to ensure interpersonal interaction in the given contexts. From this perspective, deeper interpersonal understanding (esp. in situations prone to conflict) must be seen as a challenge in general, not only in intercultural settings (Applegate & Sypher, 1996). In reverse, constructivist premises also lay the grounds for change: individuals are not tied to their cultures, but they can change and modify their knowledge and their attitudes through communication and new experiences. In short: individuals should be encouraged to interact because there is legitimate hope for understanding arising from constructing common realities. Or conversely, understanding cannot be reached if there is no communication or even contact.

### 3.9. *The systemic paradigm as a norm for intercultural research*

The *systems* perspective as another provider of norms for intercultural contact by Möller-Kiero and Busch partly parallels the constructivist approach. Systems theories confirm the constructivist assumptions of individuals creating their (shared) lifeworlds through interpretation. However, while constructivist approaches as such focus on the perception processes of individuals, a systems perspective takes into consideration the consequences for conceiving larger social spheres. Apart from intrapersonal understanding in intercultural contexts, systems approaches consider the potential of transforming full social settings into more peaceful environments (Jiang, 2006).

Kim herself strongly favors and contributes to systems approaches, and this might be why she sees far reaching potentials for this research view in many fields of intercultural research, as for example *intrapersonal processes in intercultural communication* that need to be seen in their systemic and complex contexts. Similarly complex through context are the thematic fields of *adaptation to a new culture* as well as the question of *cultural identity in intercultural contexts*.

### 3.10. *The postmodernist paradigm as a norm for intercultural research*

*Postmodernist* orientations lately had been strongly favored by social researchers who had started reading their own academic discipline from a critical and from a discourse perspective. Postmodern approaches strongly rely on the perspectivist character on humans perceiving their world. However, in contrast to constructivists, postmodernists do not believe in people reaching peace and harmony just through interaction. Instead, they remind us of the omnipresence of power asymmetries in interpersonal relations. As a consequence, ethnocentrism emerges as a hindrance to

intercultural understanding at eye level. Postmodernists conclude that strong cultural relativism is the only morally acceptable attitude in intercultural contact. Radically acknowledging (cultural) difference forces interactants into passive observer positions and prohibits any form of intervention as an unacceptable (because unconsented) intrusion on the basis of power asymmetries (for the case of intercultural research cf. O'Regan & MacDonald, 2007).

Kim gives this perspective an extra category in her model pointing to the large field of *power inequalities in intercultural relations*. However, postmodernist attitudes can be found as moral meta-concepts underlying other thematic fields, too, as for example research on cultural identity as well as emic approaches to cultural communication.

### 3.11. *Clusters of research traditions and their particular preferences for normative paradigms*

As a result, it may be concluded that there are several different normative meta-concepts on the basis of which theories in intercultural communication research may be based on. The examples given here do not claim completeness, and other additional and alternative normative orientations may be found. However, even the examples given here strongly elucidate that approaches may considerably differ in their recommendations that they will address to intercultural actors for their practice in social life.

Relating to intercultural research's ability of delivering normative orientations to the sustainability debate to flesh out ways to intercultural understanding over there, it must be concluded here that intercultural research does not come up with one central and explicit norm but that there may be many different and even opposing normative orientations that can be found in research.

If intercultural research is supposed to become connected to and to contribute to the sustainability debate, it will be crucial that researchers become more aware of these different underlying paradigms. The overview at hand has shown some paradigms in existing research clusters. However, any thematic field can practically be treated from the perspective of any normative metaconcept. Consequently, researchers will need to become more aware of the normative views they build their research upon. Conversely, they should also see the normative orientations that they may neglect or even counterpose for at least a given amount of time. This awareness of paradigms in intercultural research will then have to be communicated to the global debate on sustainability to receive further (global and equal) discussion there.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnic peace discourse is a future-oriented phenomenon aiming at desirable social changes. As a consequence, this discourse tends to be located outside the provinces of traditional research that emphasizes on descriptive and analytical approach-

es. In lieu thereof, political discourse turns out to be more of a home for the deliberation of normative future designs for social life. Here, the global discourse on sustainability in particular has emerged as a field for motivating societies to commit themselves to concerted change. Since the 1970s, the political sustainability discourse has grown from covering economic and ecological concerns in the beginning to a multifaceted bunch of fields of application in social life. Only recently, matters of global intercultural understanding have made it into the growing catalogues of sustainability efforts, and they are still waiting for elaboration and specification. Research on intercultural communication may be able to contribute these details, but for the time being, it is lacking clear normative concepts that may help converting research results into orientations for good practice. A particular strength of the sustainability discourse today may be found in its extreme openness for including new concepts. Instead of anticipating putative solutions, sustainability discourse encourages continuous negotiation and discussion considering the journey to be the reward. Research on intercultural communication is built on a number of different normative traditions. However, contemporary publications rarely make them explicit. This article has given a few examples of underlying normative paradigms like positivism, humanism, critical rationalism, constructivism, systemic approaches as well as postmodernism. In theory, each of these orientations may lay the ground for any field of occupation and research in intercultural communication. In research practice, research themes and methods cluster in certain areas whereas other fields are neglected. These thematic-methodological clusters show preferences for selected normative paradigms. Although these normative paradigms form a basis below the actual theoretical foundations of research studies, these paradigms significantly determine the interpretations of these studies' practical relevance: What should and what should not be done in intercultural research and practice is defined by underlying normative paradigms. If intercultural communication research strengthens its awareness of this normative power, it will be able to more precisely contribute to an important field of action for global sustainability: The sustainability of intercultural understanding. This preliminary study on the basis of an exemplary and critical review of intercultural literature shows that further and more systematic research will be required as it can be seen promising and useful for establishing further insights into the potential of the concept.

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