**Short communication**

**From interculturality to coexistence:Towards a new societal paradigm**

**Abstract**

This article analyzes the evolution from interculturality to coexistence paradigms through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks incorporating Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, Bhabha's third space theory, and Gilroy's conviviality concept. Using mixed-method methodology combining systematic literature review with comparative case studies of four policy contexts (Council of Europe's "Intercultural Cities," UK community cohesion, Barcelona's intercultural mediation, and Melilla's "convivencia"), we conducted document analysis, 28 semi-structured interviews, and participant observations analyzed through grounded theory. Findings reveal that while interculturality builds cultural bridges, coexistence offers a more holistic framework recognizing inherent tensions in diversity while transforming them into constructive dynamics. Key results include evolution from cultural exchange to common space construction, explicit conflict recognition, and multi-level interventions. We propose a "transformative coexistence" model characterized by dynamic identities, agonistic pluralism, balanced difference recognition, structural attention, and relational ethics, informing policies for plural societies.

**Keywords** : interculturality, coexistence, cultural diversity, pluralism, social integration

**1. Introduction**

Contemporary societies are facing unprecedented challenges in terms of managing cultural diversity. The phenomenon of globalization, the intensification of migration flows and the transformation of identities in an interconnected world have made traditional approaches to multiculturalism and assimilation obsolete (Vertovec, 2007). In this context, interculturality has emerged since the 1980s as a paradigm for rethinking relations between different cultural groups, emphasizing exchanges and interactions rather than simple cohabitation (Cantle, 2012).

However, after several decades of experimentation with intercultural policies and practices, it appears that this conceptual framework reaches certain limits in the face of the complexity of contemporary societies. As Dervin (2017, p. 28) points out, "interculturality often remains a prisoner of an idealized vision of interactions between cultures that obscures power relations and structural inequalities." Our research is based on the observation that we are witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm, that of coexistence, which does not replace interculturality but encompasses and goes beyond it. This paradigmatic transition deserves to be analysed from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view, in order to understand its implications for social cohesion and public policies.

This study proposes to explore the contours of this transition from interculturalism to coexistence, by questioning the continuities, ruptures and conceptual and practical innovations that characterize it. We hypothesize that the transition from intercultural to coexistence paradigms is positively associated with: (1) increased recognition of structural inequalities in policy frameworks, (2) enhanced multi-level intervention strategies, and (3) improved mechanisms for constructive conflict management in diverse societies.

**2. Theoretical framework and literature review**

**2.1 Interculturality: emergence and characteristics**

The concept of interculturality was initially developed in education (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999) before being extended to other fields such as public policy, communication, and management. It differs from multiculturalism in its emphasis on interactions between cultures rather than their simple juxtaposition. As Demorgon (2005: 43) points out, interculturality presupposes a "dynamic relationship between cultural entities that influence each other in the process of reciprocal transformation". This dynamic perspective has gained increasing recognition in contemporary scholarship, with researchers emphasizing that intercultural encounters involve ongoing processes of negotiation, adaptation, and mutual learning (Dervin, 2016; Piller, 2017). Recent studies have further highlighted how interculturality promotes cultural dialogue and co-construction of meaning, moving beyond static representations of culture to embrace fluid, contextual interactions (Holliday, 2018; Kramsch, 2021). This approach recognizes that cultural identities are not fixed entities but are continuously reshaped through intercultural contact and exchange (Jackson, 2020).

The work of Cantle (2012) has shown how intercultural policies have gradually become an alternative to the multiculturalist model, particularly in Europe. They are based on three fundamental principles: the recognition of cultural diversity as a resource, the promotion of dialogue between cultures, and the development of intercultural competencies in individuals and organizations.

Byram and Wagner (2018) define intercultural competencies as "the set of knowledge, skills, and interpersonal skills that enable an individual to interact appropriately and effectively with people from different cultures". This competency-based approach has given rise to numerous intercultural training and education programs, both in the school and professional fields.

However, as several critics have pointed out (Meer &Modood, 2012), the intercultural approach sometimes tends to underestimate the power relations between cultural groups and to presuppose an equality of conditions that does not always exist in social reality. According to Lentin and Titley (2021), "interculturalism risks depoliticizing the issue of cultural inequalities by reducing it to a problem of communication and mutual perception" (p. 89).

**2.2 Coexistence: Towards a New Paradigm**

Faced with the limits of the intercultural paradigm, several authors have begun to explore the concept of coexistence as an alternative framework. Amin (2002) thus proposes a "politics of co-presence" that emphasizes shared spaces and everyday practices rather than formalized intercultural dialogue. "Building on Amin's foundational work on co-presence, Wessendorf (2013) develops the notion of "commonplace diversity" to describe the ordinary, mundane forms of negotiation of difference that occur in super-diverse urban spaces. Her ethnographic study of Hackney, London, reveals how diversity becomes normalized through everyday encounters in shared spaces such as markets, schools, and public transport, where residents develop what she terms an "ethos of mixing" (Wessendorf, 2013). This concept challenges formal intercultural dialogue approaches by demonstrating that meaningful coexistence often emerges through routine, unremarkable interactions rather than structured intercultural programs.

Wessendorf's "commonplace diversity" is characterized by three key dimensions: first, the normalization of difference, where cultural diversity becomes an unremarkable feature of daily life; second, the development of practical competencies for navigating difference without necessarily developing deep intercultural understanding; and third, the emergence of shared local identities that transcend cultural boundaries while respecting differences (Wessendorf, 2013).

Zapata-Barrero (2019:76) offers a significant contribution to this debate by clearly distinguishing interculturalism from what he calls "intercultural citizenship" which integrates dimensions of social justice and political recognition. According to this author, "true intercultural coexistence cannot do without reflection on the material and political conditions that allow the different cultural groups to participate in the definition of a common project" (p. 76).

Coexistence, as we conceptualize it, is not simply a matter of mutual tolerance but involves the active construction of a "living together" that recognizes tensions and conflicts as inherent in any plural society. As Amin (2012) points out, it requires the creation of negotiation spaces where differences can be expressed without threatening social ties.

This approach is also inspired by the work on "conviviality" (Gilroy, 2004) and the "conviviality turn" (Nowicka&Vertovec, 2014), which highlight ordinary forms of sociability in multicultural contexts. According to Gilroy (2004), conviviality refers to "a process of cohabitation and interaction that has made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in British urban areas" (p. 11). This notion emphasizes day-to-day interactions rather than institutional policies.

The perspective of coexistence is also in line with the reflections on "agonistic pluralism" developed by Mouffe (2016), who considers conflict as constitutive of pluralist democracy. For Mouffe, the challenge is not to eliminate conflicts between different worldviews but to transform them into "agonisms", i.e. legitimate oppositions between adversaries who mutually recognize their right to defend their positions.

In a complementary approach, Guénif-Souilamas (2023) proposes to "decolonize integration paradigms" by developing a conception of citizenship that does not presuppose cultural homogeneity as a horizon. This "post-migratory" approach invites us to rethink the modalities of coexistence based on the concrete experiences of minorities and populations of immigrant origin.

**3. Methodology**

This research is based on a mixed methodology combining theoretical analysis and empirical study. First, we carried out a systematic review of the literature on interculturality and coexistence in different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, political science, urban studies). This review identified the main conceptual developments and theoretical debates around these concepts.

Secondly, we conducted a comparative study of four cases of policies and practices aimed at promoting either interculturality or coexistence in different contexts:

* The Council of Europe's "Intercultural Cities" programme
* Community cohesion initiatives in the United Kingdom
* Intercultural mediation practices in Barcelona
* The policies of "convivencia" in Melilla (Spain)

For each case, we analysed official documents, conducted semi-structured interviews with key actors (n=28) and made participant observations in spaces where these policies are deployed. As Giménez Romero (2019) suggests, this comparative approach makes it possible to "grasp the nuances between different models of diversity management and to identify the contextual factors that influence their implementation" (p. 217).

The data analysis was carried out according to an anchored theorization approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), allowing conceptual categories to emerge from the empirical material. This method, particularly adapted to the study of complex social phenomena, has allowed us to avoid imposing a pre-established theoretical framework and to remain attentive to the meanings that the actors themselves give to their practices.

**4. Results and discussion**

**4.1 From exchange to the construction of a common space**

The analysis of empirical data reveals a clear transition from interculturality—focused on cultural exchange and mutual understanding—to a more integrative paradigm of coexistence. This shift responds to the limitations of intercultural initiatives that often overlook structural inequalities and power imbalances.

The transition is exemplified by the "Intercultural Cities" program, where participating municipalities have expanded their efforts to include initiatives promoting shared public spaces, cross-community collaboration, and conflict mediation mechanisms. A municipal official emphasized the importance of not only promoting awareness of others but also creating the conditions for people to live together, sometimes because of their differences.

This evolution aligns with Bhabha's (2007) concept of moving from "cultural diversity"—which juxtaposes distinct, often essentialized cultures—to "cultural difference," which acknowledges the fluid, hybrid, and negotiated nature of identity. It is within this “third space” that genuine coexistence—neither assimilation nor separation—can take place.

The findings also highlight how coexistence frameworks explicitly recognize the inevitability of social tensions. Unlike intercultural approaches that seek harmony, coexistence encourages the management of conflict as a potential for transformation. This has led to the emergence of “coexistence competencies”, which prioritize negotiation, compromise, and sustained social interaction amid deep differences—drawing on Mouffe's (2016) theory of agonistic pluralism.

Furthermore, the study underscores that coexistence strategies operate across multiple levels—from interpersonal interactions to institutional reforms and symbolic representations. This contrasts with intercultural strategies that often concentrate on individual-level change. The "convivencia" policies in Melilla, for example, illustrate how systemic, multi-scalar efforts can foster inclusive identities and structural equity.

In summary, the results point toward a "transformative coexistence" model—characterized by dynamic identities, recognition of structural conditions, and an ethical, relational approach to difference—which may better address the complexities of plural societies.

**4.2 Recognition of tensions and conflicts**

A second major result concerns the place given to tensions and conflicts in both paradigms. While the intercultural approach tends to emphasize harmony and consensus, coexistence initiatives are more acknowledging the inevitability of tensions in plural societies.

The study of intercultural mediation practices in Barcelona illustrates this evolution. Initially focused on facilitating dialogue between communities, these practices now include a dimension of "constructive conflict management" that considers them not as failures but as opportunities for social transformation.

This recognition of tensions is accompanied by the development of what we propose to call "coexistence competences", which go beyond traditional intercultural competences. These skills include the ability to negotiate disagreements, to work out temporary compromises, and to maintain social relations despite deep differences.

As Dikeç (2022) observes in his analysis of urban conflicts, "the challenge is not to remove antagonisms but to create the institutional and social conditions for them to express themselves in a non-destructive way" (p. 137). This perspective is in line with the agonistic approach of Mouffe (2016) and suggests that peaceful coexistence does not imply the absence of conflicts but their transformation into constructive dynamics.

**4.3 The articulation of the scales of intervention**

The comparative analysis of the four cases studied reveals a significant difference in the articulation of the intervention scales. Intercultural approaches often favour actions targeted at specific groups, while coexistence initiatives tend to adopt a more systemic perspective, acting simultaneously on several levels: interpersonal interactions, community dynamics, institutions and collective representations.

The "convivencia" policies in Melilla exemplify this multi-level approach, combining inter-community dialogue initiatives, institutional reforms to ensure equal access to public services, and symbolic work on collective narratives integrating cultural diversity as a constitutive element of local identity.

This articulation of scales makes it possible to overcome one of the frequently identified limitations of intercultural approaches: their tendency to focus on interpersonal dimensions to the detriment of the structural factors that shape relations between cultural groups. As Taguieff (2019) notes, "thinking about coexistence implies taking into account both the daily interactions, the institutional arrangements and the collective imaginaries that condition the relationship to otherness" (p. 93).

**5. Towards a model of "transformative coexistence"**

Based on the results of our research, we propose a theoretical model of "transformative coexistence" that could constitute a framework for analysis and action for contemporary plural societies. This model differs from assimilationist, multiculturalist and intercultural approaches by several characteristics:

1. A dynamic conception of cultural identities : unlike multiculturalism, which tends to essentialize cultures, transformative coexistence recognizes the fluid, hybrid, and evolving nature of identities. As Bhabha (2007) states, "every culture is permanently in a process of hybridization that defies the idea of cultural purity" (p. 64).
2. An agonistic approach to pluralism : inspired by the work of Mouffe (2016), the model considers conflict as constitutive of any plural democratic society, the challenge being to transform it into "agonism" (opposition between legitimate adversaries) rather than "antagonism" (opposition between enemies). This perspective implies the creation of institutions and procedures that allow disagreements to be expressed within a democratic framework.
3. A balance between recognition and overcoming differences : transformative coexistence aims neither at the erasure of cultural specificities (as in assimilation), nor at their simple juxtaposition (as in multiculturalism), but at their articulation in a common social project. According to Saillant (2018), it is a question of "recognizing differences without absolutizing them, and of building commonality without denying particularities" (p. 119).
4. Attention to material and structural conditions : beyond intercultural dialogue, this model emphasizes the importance of socio-economic and institutional factors in building sustainable coexistence. As Zapata-Barrero (2019) reminds us, "without social justice and real equality of opportunity, intercultural dialogue risks being nothing more than a façade masking structural inequalities" (p. 83).
5. An ethics of relationship : transformative coexistence is based on what Glissant (1997) calls a "poetics of relationship", which recognizes the fundamental interdependence of human beings beyond their differences. This ethics implies an openness to otherness that is neither appropriation nor indifference, but recognition of what Ricoeur (1990) calls "oneself as another".

This model could inform both academic research on plural societies and the development of public policies aimed at promoting social cohesion in contexts of cultural diversity.

**6. Conclusion and Recommendation**

This research aimed to explore the shift from interculturality to coexistence in managing cultural diversity, showing how policies are evolving from promoting cultural exchange to creating shared spaces and addressing structural inequalities. It is an original study based on both a literature review and empirical research, including interviews and case studies. The main argument is that coexistence offers a more effective framework for diverse societies by recognizing conflict as natural and identities as dynamic and negotiated. The study recommends adopting multi-level, inclusive approaches that go beyond dialogue to include conflict management, structural reforms, and relational ethics. Given the limited scholarly work on this specific shift, the study fills an important gap and calls for more research on how coexistence can shape future diversity policies.

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