Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Intercultural Communication Research

ISSN: 1747-5759 (Print) 1747-5767 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjic20

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To cite this article: Jane Woodin (19 Nov 2025): Decentring Intercultural Competence Frameworks in the Ecological Turn, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2025.2586672

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2025.2586672

Published online: 19 Nov 2025.

JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2025.2586672

Decentring Intercultural Competence Frameworks in the Ecological Turn

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the possibilities for re-thinking current intercultural communication frameworks for human-more than human relationships. Drawing on stories of nature-connection for well-being gathered from several diverse communities in a multicultural region of the UK, the article uses ethnographically-informed mediated discourse analysis to reflect on how we can learn from these stories a) as stories in themselves, b) in relation to the sophisticated work from across the globe on human-nature relationships, c) the implications for decentring the human in Intercultural Communication Studies; and d) the possibilities for re-designing the notion (and frameworks) of intercultural competence under an ecological turn.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 25 April 2025
Accepted 3 November 2025

KEYWORDS
Intercultural competence; ecological turn; posthuman; nature; meaning

1. Introduction: Intercultural Communication

It is generally agreed in the Anglophone world and beyond, that intercultural communication as a "formal" field of study (in higher education institutions) developed from the work of Edward T Hall in the Foreign Services Institute (FSI) in the United States in the early 50s. Hall's anthropological work (Hall, 1959, 1976) influenced the early interest in intercultural communication, which took a culturally comparative turn under the request of the FSI who were keen to understand better "foreign cultures." The term became incorporated in the USA into early formations of the National Communication Association, and a broader subject of study in Higher Education from then on, in Europe particularly among business Schools and in the US particularly within Schools of Communication which typically include media and journalism studies (Woodin, 2017). The close relationship between language and intercultural communication was strengthened in the Anglophone world through work on "foreign" or "modern" language learning and teaching (e.g. Buttjes & Byram, 1991; Byram & Zarate, 1996), and later in applied linguistics, in particular in English language education (e.g. Baker, 2024; Holliday, 1999), and discourse analysis (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 1995). The international groups CULTNET (Intercultural Community for Researchers and Educators), the International Association for Languages and Intercultural Communication (IALIC), and the

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(largely UK-based) British Association of Applied Linguistics Special Interest Group in Intercultural Communication (BAAL SIG in IC) are longer-standing examples of the legacy of this earlier work.

Kulich et al. (2020, drawing on others) trace references to *Kultur*, *culture*, *cross-cultural* and *intercultural*, starting in the 18th Century, and remind us not to attribute the emergence of a discipline to a narrow group of scholars, but to recognize the multiplicity of voices

As intercultural studies developed, there was a clear move from more cross-cultural comparative approaches (frequently considered as essentialist and reductive) to a focus on small cultures (Holliday, 1999) and processes of meaning-making. This shift is evident through the three prefaces to Scollon and Scollon's book Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach (1995; Scollon & Scollon, 2000; Scollon et al., 2011); extracts from the first and last follow:

> When as westerners or Asians we do business together, when as men or women we work together in an office, or when as members of senior or junior generations we develop a product together we engage in what we call "interdiscourse communication." (preface to first edition, 1995)

> Perhaps the most significant aspect of this evolution has been our development over the past decade of the theoretical framework of mediated discourse analysis, an approach to discourse which focuses less on broad constructs like "culture" and more on the everyday concrete actions through which culture is produced. (preface to the third edition, 2011)

This move to understanding processes of meaning-making over a more comparative approach has led to research focusing less on a priori conceptualizations of "culture" to process-orientations, where the question was more about understanding how "culture" arises in social interactions. So we would ask instead:

> "Who has introduced culture as a relevant category, for what purposes and with what consequences?" They state: "In this way groups such as 'cultures' are taken to be the outcomes of social actions and of histories but have no direct causal status in themselves." (Scollon & Scollon, 2005, p. 545)

This approach has influenced many scholars, myself included (Woodin, 2018), and highlighted by Piller (2017) in her agenda for intercultural communication research.

We should remember, however, that even a process-oriented approach does not eliminate the need to define "culture" to identify who has "raised culture as meaningful" (see above). Shifting to a process-orientation does not therefore remove the onus on the researcher to identify how they understand "culture," but it does allow for social action as opposed to "large cultures" to be the a priori focus of attention. And, as Collier et al. (2001) note: "Whenever the word Culture is used, ask yourself the following questions. What does Culture mean here? Who stands to benefit from this definition? What other possible definitions are left out and why?" (p. 229).

While early cross-cultural comparative approaches took descriptions of "culture" (often as a large -often national- construct) as a predictor of communicative behaviour, a more process-oriented approach to intercultural communication opens up spaces to understand relational aspects of interaction which might have been missed before in a cross-cultural encounter, such as the identities of the speakers, the context of the

interaction, reasons for interacting and outcomes. And here, then, relationships can be examined, power can be visibilized: "the whole social structure is present in each interaction" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 67).

1.2. De-Centring Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication as a field of study has struggled until recently with moving beyond the Anglo/Euro-centric, (largely) white male contributions. Voices outside of this sphere include a call for "other-centric" perspectives (e.g. Asante, 2017; Miike, 2017). Some historical examples include: Mowlana (2021) reporting on Abu Rayhan al-Biruni's anthropological work on Indian culture, and Steppat and Tong (2021), who note early conceptualizations of the "intercultural" in China and the Middle East as far back as the 17th Century. It is interesting also to note that the strong influence of Said (1978) whose seminal work on how the West views the East through an offensively simplistic, reductionist, and over-stereotyped lens did not make much of an appearance in early conceptualizations of intercultural communication emanating from the Anglo-centric origins cited above.[1]

Asante (2017), in a discussion of Africacentricity emphasizes the importance of locating oneself to make more explicit the question of: *Where do you stand when you seek to locate a text, phenomenon, or person?* This recognizes the importance of locating the subjectivity of the researcher in work in order to visibilize connections, relationships, and de-centralize research which otherwise might appear to be universal (see also Busch, 2025). Drawing on Menezes de Souza (2019), Diniz de Figueiredo and Martinez (2021) explain:

> Unmasking one's own locus of enunciation (and/or that of others) thus means being conscious of and explicit about the geographical, historical, bodily, and ideological context from which one is speaking … [I]t is often the case that theories and concepts in applied linguistics that are developed by academics in the Global North are presented in ways that neglect their localized nature, which ends up leading to an often general (and inaccurate) understanding that these ideas are to be taken as universal and all-encompassing. (Diniz de Figueiredo & Martinez, 2021)

This move to the open recognition of social and historical injustices is part of what Halualani et al. (2009) call the "critical turn" in intercultural communication, addressing historical positionings and injustices, recognizing that "dialogue" is never an equal exchange of views. It also allows space for a deeper understanding of positionality, interlocutors' backgrounds, (colonial) histories, and power relations.

Decolonial work in intercultural communication has to date focused largely on human–human relationality, and ignored the post-human, according to Mendoza and Kinefuchi (2016) who argue for a 5th turn towards an ecological approach. Under the umbrella of new materialism and drawing on Haraway (2013), Mendoza and Kinefuchi ask:

> But perhaps the time has come … when we shall find our home again … in animate Earth where all beings speak, and where beings speak in many diverse languages, not just human—the language of stars, fish, rocks, trees, wind, sea, sky, etc., and, yes, the language of dreams, myth, and story. This is the time when we find the freedom in giving up arrogance and our exclusive claim to sentience, meaning, and significance.

> Finally, as we open our eyes to the reality that we live not in a silent inanimate world, but in a living, organic world that reacts and responds to our actions and communication, it behoves us to ask: How might we imagine living differently as humans? How would we connect with others as "cultural beings"? (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016, p. 277)

The authors note that the majority of interculturally-focused articles which discuss the environment/ecology have tended to use ecology to refer to social environments such as workplace or educational ecologies and contexts rather than "the relations and interactions between organisms in the biosphere" (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016, p. 277).

Posthuman approaches in intercultural communication have also moved towards embracing relationships with creative practice (e.g. Harvey et al., 2022; Holmes & Peña Dix, 2022) things in the broadest sense of the word (e.g. Dervin & Yuan, 2022; Fenoulhet, 2020; Kebabi, 2022; Ros i Solé et al., 2020), drawing heavily in places on inspiration from new materialist concepts as messy assemblages, processes, flows, and rhizomatic relationships (e.g. Ferri, 2020) as metaphors for the inter-connectedness of entities and to focus on the decentring of the human. Binaries of self/other, same/different human/non-human, inner, and outer (Haraway, 2013) need re-imagining, and, as noted by Pennycook (2017), this is a big – but necessary- jump for intercultural communication studies.

It is against, within, or alongside these understandings of intercultural communication that this article will discuss the consequences for intercultural competence frameworks, drawing on examples taken from a recent project (*Nature, Meaning and Connection: Intercultural Stories)*. The project was designed to understand the multiple ways in which people from diverse backgrounds articulate their connections with nature; they serve to offer examples from praxis which contribute to the re-thinking of commonly accepted notions of intercultural competence. Firstly, in the spirit of visibilizing my own positioning, motivations, and limitations (see above) I offer a commentary on my "locus of enunciation" Diniz de Figueiredo and Martinez (2021).

1.3. My Positionality

I locate myself largely in the Eurocentric tradition of intercultural communication; I was born and brought up in the UK, with an academic background in Modern Languages, Education, and Applied Linguistics. In the 1980s and early 90s, I worked as a secondary school teacher (11–18 years) in the UK, and spent four years in Nicaragua, Central America, working in the Universidad de León, a regional European Twin towns network, and a Popular Education Association in Managua. In these spaces many "projects" were developed and executed between friendship groups in the European/North American towns and their sister towns in Nicaragua; many of these links are still in existence today. The privileges afforded to me as someone who could – in an emergency such as a hurricane – call on family in the UK to offer me transport to a safer place were felt acutely and I realized that the power/privilege differential would be too difficult for me to live the rest of my life in Nicaragua. This experience influenced me in many ways and led to my involvement in early intercultural communication work in the UK, in particular developing a focus on ethnography as a way of understanding how we learn to "become" members of groups. As an academic member of staff with a teaching specialist role (with

little time for research) in an "elite" UK university for many years, I have found myself occupying an "in-between" space of considerable privilege as a scholar-educator, and yet viewed by some colleagues as a "lower status" academic because of my focus on education, teaching, and the student experience.

Early childhood experiences (one of four siblings) of nature were an integral part of my weekends; for several years, holidays were camping, walking, cycling. Vegetable growing was -and still is- an important part of my life outside work. While these connections with nature enhance my life considerably, I consider myself to be a long way from shifting my human-centredness in my nature connectedness.

As primarily a scholar and educator in language and intercultural communication, my focus is often on educating students who will then take their learning into new contexts (whether inside-or outside- of universities). The link with practice is therefore of particular importance, and our debates often problematize this theory-practice relationship. We make considerable use of competence frameworks and descriptors (also in relation to outcomes for students), discussions about language/s and speakers' positionality, equality, interpersonal relationships, expectations, and structures, about large (e.g. nation) and smaller cultural categories as well as discussions around lasting legacies of injustices (race, gender, class). We apply and critique cultural descriptors to real-world examples and invite reflection on – and critique of – experiences of "learning to become" through systematic ethnographic investigation.

Walsh (2018), in her introduction to *On decoloniality*, discusses the importance of linking theory with doing, as praxis, understood as thought-reflection-action, rather than allowing theory to rule. She describes praxis as:

> the doing-thinking, with the people, collectives, and communities that enact decoloniality as a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis; that is, with the activity of thinking and theorizing from praxis. (Walsh, 2018, cited in, p. 9; Holmes & Peña Dix, 2022)

The theory-praxis relationship is integral to learning in my context. As an educator in a formal institutional setting, it is also my responsibility to ensure that the relationship between learning, outcomes, and assessment (in the broadest sense of the word) is coherent internally, to students and the wider world. This can involve some form of descriptor of learning and/or achievement, one of which can be described as intercultural competence; a term which is often used- and critiqued- in intercultural communication studies.

2. Intercultural Competence Frameworks

Intercultural communication studies rely on a range of approaches to the "cultural" and concepts of communication as described above – some focusing more on knowledge, others on processes of learning and knowing. All – at least all in circulation to my knowledge – focus on human-human relationships.

The origins of the term *intercultural communicative competence* (ICC) in language learning and teaching can be found in Hymes' (1972) work on communicative competence, brought into a communicative approach in language learning (e.g. Brumfit &

Johnson, 19791), and later developed by Byram (1997) in relation to intercultural communicative competence.

The notion of *competence* is regularly differentiated in occupational developmental literature from *competency* although not always consistently; typically, competency is understood as the ability to perform certain measurable tasks, and competence as a longer-term ability to perform over a long period of time, and often carrying a reflective and ethical dimension.[2]

Considering the complexity and process-orientation of intercultural communication, it has been argued that a competence framework – or model- is inappropriate for representing or defining intercultural development (Holmes, 2023, Ferri, 2018). If, however, intercultural learning is to be recognized and understood as educationally learnable (and teachable), we need to find a way to articulate that learning. The term "competence" itself may not be the best one to use but some kind of descriptor/articulation is important for those (such as myself) with education and learning development at the centre of their activity; as noted by Fleming (2009):

> Both teacher and learners need some statement of intended learning outcomes to support classroom activity and to bring an element of transparency to assessment processes. Whether these are called competences, standards, descriptors or indicators is less important than that they are used with the appropriate attitude. They need to be seen as a dynamic rather than static tool, constantly open to negotiation and revision and not divorced from processes of moderation and exemplification. (Fleming, 2009, as cited in, p. 92; Byram, 2020, p. 82)

Intercultural competence frameworks have been developed for different purposes, for example for language learners (e.g. Byram, 1997, 2020) for students in internationalized settings (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2007, 2020), for NGO international development professionals (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002) or for international business (Marx, 2011; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2022). Organization management has made use of psychometric tests and certification routes for business (often with the support of researchers) (e.g. https://worldwork.global/), designed to develop intercultural workplace performance.

Some have proposed "levels" of intercultural competence; early examples include Nostrand, (1968), and later Tomic and Lengel, (1996) whose 4-stage model moved from "tourist response" to "an informed, affective and cognitive approach." The INCA framework (MacDonald et al., 2009) draws on the model of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the UK National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Languages. This identifies six component skills in intercultural competence: tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy. Each skill is then subdivided into three constituent elements – motivation, skill/knowledge, and behaviour; these are realized at three different ability levels – basic, intermediate, and full.

These components are not unlike the ICC Descriptors from Byram (1997) covering 5 savoirs: Attitudes: Relativising self, Valuing others (*savoir être*); Skills: Interpret and relate (*savoir comprendre*); Knowledge: Of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal (*savoirs*); Skills: Discover and/or interact (*savoir apprendre/faire*); and Education: Political education, Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*).

A full review of the broad range of competence frameworks is beyond the scope of this article, but for the purposes of the focus here, it is worth noting that some common threads include:

- the development of knowledge
- the ability to adopt perspectives of others, and relativize one's own views, developing a strong emic stance (Byram, 2020; Fantini, 2020)
- challenging taken-for granted phenomena and/or stereotypes;
- the recognition of different meanings across languages and contexts (Agar, 1993)
- the development of one's own ideolect (Risager, 2006)
- the ability to articulate one's "political" position (Byram, 1997; Guilherme, 2002)
- a strong ethical dimension.

The (in-) separability of "self- and other," particularly in the process-oriented posthuman context is an issue for intercultural competence frameworks which are built on individual descriptions of behaviour, even though they describe the processes of relating to and with others; as Deardorff (2006) asks, with reference to non-Western conceptualizations of Intercultural competence which focus on relationality and power (e.g. Nwosu, 2009; Zaharna, 2009):

> How can future definitions of intercultural competence better integrate this relational aspect, given its prominence within non-western conceptualizations of intercultural competence? [. . .] where is intercultural competence situated - within the individual or within all individuals in the interaction? (Deardorff, 2006, p. 266)

Intercultural competence frameworks have not yet been systematically critiqued from a decolonial/Southern perspective, perhaps because of their practical/educational orientation. Risager (2022) proposes some examples of how Byram's framework could address decoloniality and transnational developments, such as making global inequity and its historical roots visible to the learners (2022, p. 13). This process of seeking to uncover historical and contemporary injustices, focusing on relationality (which can help to visibilize power, positioning and inequity), may also contribute to re-imagining the self-other distinction critiqued by many (e.g. Ferri, 2020; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008).

Decolonial researchers have also challenged the "ownership" of educational content and outcomes in the hands of the "experts" (teachers) as opposed to those of the learners. This goes further than inclusion of student voices and experiences when designing courses (e.g. Holliday, 2018), but the ability to critique, and transform education by the learners themselves (Barnett, 1997, Sau et al., 2024).

How far a decolonial intercultural competence framework is even possible in the ecological turn will be on the minds of some (e.g. Ferri, 2022). However as explained above, there are good reasons from my perspective for trying. This article will now draw upon evidence from a nature-connectedness project developed with the aim of visibilizing and building on the perspectives of participants; examples will also be discussed in relation to the possibility of de-centring intercultural competence frameworks from their human-human focus.

3. Nature, Meaning, and Connection: An Intercultural Stories Project

The Intercultural Stories Project came about through a partnership between the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT), regional community groups, and the University of Sheffield, UK.[3]

This Wildlife Trust had been part of a UK Government-funded pilot "test and learn" scheme to gather data on how to embed green and blue social prescribing into communities with a need for mental health support. Social prescribing is defined as "Connecting people to activities, groups and support that improve health and wellbeing" (National Academy for Social Prescribing [NASP], n.d.), and in the case of green and blue social prescribing, this means activities and groups which encourage connection with the natural environment. The overall project aim was to contribute to the reduction of mental health inequalities and develop best practice in making green and blue social activities more accessible and increase participants' resilience. The communities involved have established relationships with the SRWT who have a long history of working with marginalized groups and championing the five pathways approach to nature connection: senses, emotion, beauty, meaning, and compassion (Lumber, 2016) in their work. The evaluation of this project was through a questionnaire which "measured" people's mental health well-being before and after participation in nature-related activities. The focus was on scoring wellbeing on a numerical scaling system. However, staff had noticed that people were bringing with them stories of their connection with nature and there was no way to feed them into the project work. We were invited into the project at this point, to work on gathering "stories" of people's connection with nature. Our approach to story-telling/gathering was defined jointly and in an open meeting of SRWT staff, researchers, and end-users – part of our joint statement of intent included the following:

> Impetus for this work relates in particular to the need for inclusive approaches to improving mental health across all communities. Members of the SRWT have noted that during their current programme of activities, participants are telling stories of nature, themselves, past and present; this aspect is not currently covered by the goals of their current projects. For example, participants in green social prescribing activities evaluate their connection with nature on a scale as part of evaluation activities, but what that connection means to them as a person, how it connects with their identity and lived experiences, or relates to their cultural (and linguistic) heritage is as yet underexplored. (Initial joint project meeting)

This project therefore had a three-point focus- on people, wellbeing, and nature connection. We approached the idea of "story" from the perspective of participants who were invited to understand story as they wished. Some chose to offer a chronological description of their history, with commentaries on their connection to nature, others chose to offer brief reactions. Stories were gathered through researchers accompanying over 150 people on their nature connection activities, recording responses where consent was given. From this approach, over 60 adult contributions from adults were offered.[4] Towards the end of the story-gathering activities, a story-sharing event was held to celebrate and share the contributions made; this encouraged identification with others' stories and the building of a shared understanding of the meaning of nature-connection – wider than anyone's personal perspective. Additional commentaries were offered through scribes gathering the contributions made during the event. We also participated

in a few events across the region, inviting people to offer brief commentaries and word associations relating to nature, well-being, and themselves.

Considerable work has been undertaken in understanding human nature connectedness, particularly in the psychological sciences. For example Ives et al. (2017) in a systematic review of Human-Nature-Connectedness (HNC) identified four domains (cognitive, experiential, emotional, and philosophical connections to nature). In relation to nature connectedness and wellbeing, Pritchard (2019, para. 4) notes: connection to nature in adults is associated with higher levels of eudaimonic [meaningful, related to growth] wellbeing . . . . [nature connectedness] provides a route through which basic psychological needs – such as autonomy, competence and relatedness – can be met. She proposes that nature connectedness could be a way for people to express themselves personally (autonomy), learn about natural environments and ecosystems, as well as through enhanced self-knowledge and self-development gained from being connected to nature (competence), and that being in nature can support relatedness through nature connection (see also Pritchard et al., 2019).

Lumber's (2016) pathways to nature connection (senses, emotion, beauty, meaning, and compassion) have also been considerably influential in helping design programmes of nature-connectedness, not least with the Wildlife Trust in terms of encouraging those within the social prescribing project towards greater nature connection, with activities designed around these pathways.

The work presented below differs from many of the psychological studies in that it aimed to capture the voices of participants in nature-connection activities through their own words while they were out in nature; in this way it was open-ended and allowed respondents to decide for themselves what they wanted to tell us, rather than respond to a set questionnaire. While recognizing that all research is interventional to some extent (Cicourel, 1987), regardless of the openness of the approach, the focus here was understanding how it was that people talked about their nature connection in their words. Nonetheless, short of reproducing exactly what people said, we identified certain themes running through the contributions.

Beyond the scope of this article -albeit much needed- is a review of how nature connectedness (or similar terms) is understood in other languages and from the majority world beyond a relatively narrow Euro/Anglo-centric perspective on nature connections. To offer just one example, some language/cultural groups consider human cultural diversity as inseparable from nature diversity. Drawing on data which has shown the two to co-exist geographically, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and related organizations note that:

> Western languages reflect a Western ontology that separates nature from people and this permeates our culture, thinking and approaches. ICOMOS, IUCN and all their partners should therefore aim to find different concepts and words that can overcome this situation. For these reasons, the term "naturecultures" (with no space, hyphen or "and" between them) because it recognises these domains as inseparable, entangled and mutually constituted. Naturecultures can encompass and include concepts such as biocultural diversity, geodiversity and agrobiodiversity, and the multiple perspectives of disciplines and worldviews. (Yatra aur Tammanah Commitments, 2017, cited in Vershhuuren et al., 2021, p. 18)

The ICUN proposes that nature conservation must move beyond the confines of thinking about "nature" as known through positivism and knowledge systems based on Western

philosophy and ontology. This will allow greater comprehension of the relationships that different cultures have with protected and conserved areas and recognize the ways these places are important to cultural groups (e.g. Basso, 1996).

While the contributors to the storytellings in this project all lived in the South Yorkshire region, they came from very diverse backgrounds. Groups who participated ranged from a local mental health men's group, health groups from marginalized areas of Sheffield and surrounding towns, the Caribbean heritage community Centre, refugee and asylum-seekers groups, the Roma community, and people who had been affected severely by COVID-19 through bereavement and/or their own health vulnerabilities. Others were dealing with war trauma and displacement from their country of origin.

These storytellings all took place largely in English; although participants were encouraged to talk to us in any language they wished, most of them chose to speak in English for the sake of the research, making reference to other words or phrases where relevant for them . This use the English language contributes further to "Westernizing" others' perspectives (Mallarach et al., 2019).

We have therefore aimed in this project to present voices of participants as we encountered them, and to group them in terms of the range of ways that people connected with nature individually, and what this tells us about their relationships. Where there appeared to be group (cultural)-related themes running through, we have included commentary on those. (See Woodin et al., 2025 for a full report of the project)

The stories were transcribed and reviewed by two of the team using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016), who later compared their findings with each other to arrive at themes reported below. Additional data were gathered such as feedback from story-sharing events, commentaries, and word associations given by participants at a number of events (see Woodin et al., 2025.

We found significant positive stories relating to people's wellbeing in relation to nature connectedness; this is perhaps unsurprising given the participants had chosen to participate in these groups; those who did not participate did not contribute: People have to be motivated to some extent, but often very low mood prevents this (Nield & Dayson, 2024, p. 5).

4. Themes from Intercultural Stories Project

The majority of activities were based outdoors, with some taking place inside (e.g. nature-related crafts). Walking was difficult for some people, and highly therapeutic for others.

Some of the spaces where activities took place include: walks with alpacas at the local community farm; nature-related crafting in the garden room of a local park; trips out to Yorkshire Sculpture Park; Peak District National Park walks (in all weathers); Easter wreath-making with local flowers; visits to historic rural sites nearby (e.g. reservoirs, Chatsworth House); the local dairy farm and dry-stone walling activities. A full description can be found in Woodin et al. (2025); the focus here is on considering how interculturality and ecology – and specifically intercultural competence frameworks and nature connection – could intersect further. The following sections draw heavily on the project findings.

4.1. Knowledge of/Knowing (About) Nature

People talked about their in-depth knowledge of certain kinds of wildlife; some had been researching personally their favourite (e.g. trees, or beavers); others reflected their desire to learn with their own historical roots: *And it and it's also the connection with you, knowing, finding out more about the moors* (Megan, Peak District Mosaic); *You know the things that were brought here, silk and whatever else*. Knowledge also related to cooking with wild food: *I put [wild garlic] on cheese and toast . . . baked potatoes* (David, Clifton Park, Rotherham); and knowledge of herbal benefits: *I've just started with if I can remember well Marigold, Horse tail, oats, straw. Different herbs that I've put in a little batch together, and that's for my hair*. (Megan, Peak District Mosaic). For others knowing how to survive in nature was their way of connecting: *just bivvying or tarpaulin and the foraging, or anything really . . . .mushrooms . . . leaves, gorse, flowers . . . .* (Kieran, mental health men's group).

4.2. Being (With Others) in Nature

Some people described their nature connectedness as an opportunity to connect with others (*people like me*; *as a group*) and this togetherness provided a sense of safety for some. For others, not seeing people they identified with when they were out in nature meant they felt less secure or comfortable: *something that white people do*. (Flora, Peak District Mosaic). Others articulated their nature connectedness in terms of being able to distance themselves from other humans: *And when I'm upset, and when I will get away from humans, because humans upsets me, yes, I go to a place that is nice, like here, warm just you can only hear the wind blowing, birds chirping and and animals. It's nice. It's a nice getaway* (Tami, Chatsworth House).

Others explicitly linked nature connectedness as an opportunity to connect with themselves in spaces: *It's something that, like it, really allows you to be with yourself and disconnect . . . So I think it's great to not only reconnect with nature, but also allows you to reconnect with yourself" . . .. Enjoy, like being alone, but not. Not alone. Like you're with nature. So you, you're like you have company* (Lucy, Chatsworth House).

If we consider these commentaries in relation to Attitudes (openness; relativizing self/valuing others) we can see that people value nature in relation to themselves whether for escape from something else, or allowing them to further their relationships with themselves, sometimes even as a companion for them, articulating their relationship with nature as they might a human companion. The adoption of perspectives of others – if we are considering nature as "other" - is something which was not articulated in the conversations we had on the walking activities; however, in the story-sharing day, some contributors interpreted the effects of climate change as *mother nature's revenge on us for mistreating her*. (Story-Sharing Day participant).

4.3. Heightened Spiritual Connections

For some, spiritual connections linked into a sense of "God"/"Allah"/Higher Being/other ancestral links, e.g. voodoo. Spiritual connections sometimes articulated nature as a facilitator in their relationship with spirituality: *When you come to nature, you forget*

all your problems. When you come to nature you see God's blessings for us and you discover how many there are so we have to say everything is ok (Dunia, Agden Reservoir walk), and for others they saw nature as a direct manifestation of God/Allah/Higher Beings: *Whenever I go out, I can see the beauty of our creator, how He created the different trees, how it changes colours and forms, and then the flowers, so during my walk I keep saying Subhan Allah* (Glory be to Allah) (Omaira, Agden Reservoir walk). Others would pray in nature: *I call it my prayer walk, when I go out first thing in the morning – I'm less stressed and not losing my temper – it gives me more patience to deal with things* (Flora, Peak District Mosaic). Another commented on believing in nature in a similar way to believing in a higher power (God): *I'm gonna believe in nature. And I'm gonna believe that that moon comes up and the sun is there* (Tilly, Clifton Park). Higher powers are then understood as nature creators (including humans), and other times accessed through nature which acts as a facilitator towards a closer relationship with one's spirituality, as well as something/someone to believe in; crossing boundaries between higher beings and nature as the "higher power."

4.4. Nature as a Connector to Other Times and Places

Very many people made connections across time and space, connecting back to their historical roots, childhood memories, or memories of events that happened to them in the past: *This sounds like waves, sounds. They're still there, so if you like, listen, everything is quiet, you can like get memories from back home, because the sounds are the same. So [you] just remember the time that you were connected, really, emotionally* (Lucy, Chatsworth House). In some cases nature sparked complex emotional memories for people: *And the nature just kept bringing a lot of joy. A lot of pain. And also, the deaths and loss (*Kyle, *mental health men's group)*

Memories as described by people in the nature connection activities were often personally and emotionally related, a good number of them also connecting to earlier times in their childhood. This was particularly important from a well-being perspective, bringing together different moments of people's lives, serving as a coherent connector for people to bring together parts of their lives which may have been disconnected in time and space.

5. Reframing Intercultural Competence Frameworks Through Ecological Narratives

There are clear parallels with intercultural competence frameworks in the nature connection stories. Knowledge is an important part of nature connection for some people, and it appears to give them confidence and motivation. The range of ways that knowing is described by the participants is broad and yet personal, allowing people their own interpretation of knowing (about) nature, and what that means to them. It is also integral to intercultural competence frameworks; knowledge of *self-* and *other* (Byram, 1997). If we take "other" in this case to be "nature," the knowledge focus is more on "other" than on self for the respondents when talking about knowledge. Although some respondents talked about what that knowledge can give them, and how it connected into their own understandings of themselves and their

histories (e.g. Megan, Peak District Mosaic), there was less about what they *learned* about themselves through that knowledge. This is perhaps not surprising, given we were asking them to tell us about their stories of nature connection and/or what nature "means to them," not what they learnt from that connection. It may be that much is going on in terms of people's own understandings of themselves in relation to nature, but it does not appear to be something which they articulated spontaneously as often as telling us about what they knew. And yet it is an integral part of a post – human ecological approach.

Relativization of one's own perspective in relation to nature connection was not something which was clearly articulated in many people's stories, although the concept of "mother nature" and believing in nature as well as an understanding of all beings and things having been created by God/Allah was a relatively common comment. Some recognition of how people felt in nature (as therapeutic, healing) could be understood as a recognition of nature's ability to communicate with people and affect their state, as well as competence in the self-development notion from Pritchard (2019), (see Section 3). People's articulations of their relationship with nature were indeed very individualized and personal, often with interest, curiosity, and open attitudes to being in nature (consider Byram's *savoir être*, above) and yet in some cases themes ran through the stories which offered common threads, such as spirituality/religion; an aspect which has not been described as intercultural competence, certainly in the "Anglo-western" tradition (see above). What this articulation does offer us, however, is the recognition that for many, their relationship is not simply a self-other connection with nature but engages with otherness through spiritual connection. For others their relationship with nature is tightly connected to their relationship with other (human), and for others it is the direct connection of self-in-other relationship with nature that they experience or seek. People's connection with nature stories also offer us an insight into a more complex relational approach which has been argued above its necessary for decentring intercultural competence frameworks.

It is clear from the examples offered here that the many and varied ways in which the participants in this project engaged with nature offer hope for developing human-nature relations in intercultural communication studies. Spending time in and with nature has indeed changed people and given them opportunities for understanding their connectedness on their own terms. It can be seen as evidence of possibility for an intercultural "competence" in terms of relational (capa)ability[5]- identifying with nature for example, and developing, knowledge, empathy, curiosity, and openness.

The purpose of the Intercultural Stories project was first and foremost to map out the multiple ways in which people articulated their connection to nature in relation to their wellbeing; their highly personal stories evidence opportunities for relationship-building which could contribute to re-visioning anthropocentric intercultural competence frameworks. One clear space for development is the notion of self-other discussed above. As noted by Skrefsrud (2025) in relation to intercultural dialogue, in the move from the Holocene to the Anthropocene era "relations between humans and the environment are no longer dynamic and reciprocal" (p. 282). How we can re-balance human-nature connectedness to more of an "open and equal relationship" presents an important challenge for interculturalists engaged in the ecological turn.

Intercultural competence is a concept with history and contexts which have received considerable attention, and there is much here that I have not managed to address, or which has not been discussed. For example critical cultural awareness and ethical positioning including intercultural responsibility[6] noted briefly above. However, I hope to have been able to show that there are indeed fruitful avenues for further work in this direction. Although not the focus of this article it is worth also recognizing that among the project's stories there were instances of people taking action for nature (pro-environmental behaviour), particularly in relation to climate change and concern for the environment, deforestation, lack of species diversity for example. There is scope also for reflection on the concept of intercultural citizenship and its relation with pro-environmental behaviour beyond the obvious.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to address this responsibility and open up new avenues for educator-researchers to consider the practicalities of what learning to think differently might mean in practice in an ecological turn in intercultural communication.

Some may ask why it is important to consider how competence frameworks might be of interest to postcolonial and post-human perspectives on intercultural communication, particularly with the shift to process-orientations, breaking down of solid boundaries between self-other, human-non-human, and rhizomatic connections between forms of life. It might appear as though we are trying to force "New Interculturality" into the wrong shaped space. Returning to my positionality, however, as an educator I see it as my responsibility to seek ways in which educational approaches can adapt and develop in order to represent the more process-oriented flows of posthumanism, and to find a way – To "learn to think differently about what we are in the process of becoming . . . [and to shift] beyond humanist exceptionalism and un-reflexive anthropocentrism, so as to embrace the humans' relational dependence on multiple anthropomorphic beings, but also a multitude of non-human entities" (Braidotti, 2020, p. 393). As noted by Herrmann-Israel & Byram, it is the responsibility of education systems to develop learners for these "substantial transformations" (Herrmann-Israel & Byram, 2023, p. 385); some initial considerations have been offered in this article; hopefully a door has been opened and it is only the beginning.

Notes

1. A number of publishing houses have begun purposefully to broaden the representation of voices across the world (e.g.https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/series-results/global-forum-on-southern-epistemologies/ and
   https://www.routledge.com/Southern-Studies-in-Education/book-series/SSE
   Many of the academics leading this de-centring are based in US/Anglophone West; while diverse voices are perhaps now being heard – and read- more, the economic power of intercultural communication as a field of study remains largely in the hands of the "West."
2. See MacDonald et al., 2009 for a longer discussion in the context of the development of National Standards for intercultural working, and MacDonald and Ladegaard (2025) for

a brief discussion of the (still) Anglophone and Western perspectives on competence which dominate intercultural communication studies, and notions of intercultural competence.
3. The project was approved by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee (Ref. 050691).
4. The project also engaged with around 50 young people (age 6–16) whose contributions are summarized in Woodin et al. (2025).
5. See Scarino et al. (2025) for an argument in favour of intercultural "capability" over "competence."
6. For a detailed discussion of intercultural responsibility, see Guilherme (2020).

Acknowledgement

The author woud like to thank the project team (Andrea Antoniou and Owen Hodgkinson), project consultant Nahed Arafat and the participating project community groups for their collaborations and insights. Thanks are also due to the reviewers who comments improved this article.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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