Zum Selbstverständnis des ZIS
und zum Verständnis von Interkulturalität

ZIS' Mission Statement and the Idea of Interculturality (2 Nov. 2011)

The Centre for Intercultural Studies (ZIS) of Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz has agreed upon the
following principles as a basis for its further work:

1. People live in and understand one another through culture
All areas of human life are characterized by how we perceive, devise, acquire, and modify nature and society via cultural practices and interpretative models. People are dependent on the cultural contexts in which they grow up and live; hence everything cultural is subject to three processes, namely, the dynamics of historical change, local differentiation, and social hierarchization. Nowadays, these processes have intensified in a period of increasing global economic relations, accelerated cross-cultural and mass media communications, growing international migration, and increased social differentiation.

2. The concept of cultures is indispensable
Cultures that are furthered by these dynamic processes do not serve as "containers" of contents and symbols, demarcated by clear boundaries, and where homogeneity and consistency prevail, but rather evolve and change through highly complex processes of self-assertion and negotiation of conflict or difference as well as through reception, integration, and acquisition of that which is foreign or other — frequently resulting in cultural compromise and new syntheses. If the latter are ignored or overlooked, cultures could then become, for a wide variety of reasons, essentialized and instrumentalized. Insofar as the utilization of "culture" as a notion is inseparable from a necessary awareness of problems, one should not dispense with the concept of cultures. Cultures represent complex contexts of traditions, symbols, and practices, forming clusters that are regarded by individuals as essential and where they feel that they belong, thus shaping parts of their identity and distinguishing them from others.

3. Generators and narrators of cultures form very different groups
Cultural groups that are more or less differentiated groups include members of a religious community, citizens of a given country, members of a nation, an ethnic group or a national minority as well as a group of people who display a certain sense of belonging. In a wider sense, the notion of culture can also be applied to smaller groups. For instance, it is common to talk about the culture of a company, an organization, a club, etc. Based on that perspective, people can belong simultaneously to several "cultures" which have different and convertible meanings for them depending on the situation. Cultures and their evolution are ultimately defined in terms of whether they represent a majority or minority culture in a community, whether they exist in relatively closed social milieus or further develop into transregional or transnational social areas (diasporas), whether they coexist peacefully or are in conflict.

4. What does "intercultural" mean?

"Intercultural" refers to processes of exchange, encounter and confrontation that take place directly between human beings (and indirectly through media) with reference to particular, differing cultures. Actors frequently develop essentialist and substantialist ideas of the diversity of cultures, based on their own views of themselves. As a result, problems of mutual understanding and conflict between different groups of people are often perceived as problems of intercultural understanding or conflict, since recourse to different or ambiguous traditions, symbols or practices play a role. Accordingly, intercultural processes were and frequently are characterized by a lack of understanding, mutual exclusion, and even violence. If these frequently static perceptions are interrupted, participants can instead share experiences, and the actors involved might discover individual, existing differences and similarities. Many theorists have noted that a mutual understanding, or at least a pragmatic *modus vivendi*, is possible across cultural divides. The exotic, for example, is frequently associated with a particular fascination that may suggest a kind of social acceptance. Often, such intercultural encounters are formed by new "hybrid" forms of cultural practices and symbols.

5. The tasks and subjects of interculturality research

Interculturality research focuses on the spaces and processes of intercultural dialogue and works on different levels to develop models and theories of interculturality, while retaining an empirical and practice-oriented basis. Research on interculturality is understood as analysis of the highly complex processes of communication, understanding and conflict between members of different cultures and the changes thereby induced in these members' respective understanding of themselves and others. The Centre for Intercultural Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University focuses, for instance, on a range of subjects, from examining the development of misunderstandings and conflicts; acquisition processes and communication; the composition of cultural identities; the different forms symbols play in material objects or social conventions; the principles of mutual recognition and tolerance as well as their problems and limitations through to the underlying issues involving relativism and universalism. Interculturality research aims to shed light on the causes of conflicts and problems of understanding and identifying factors for successful communication, making proposals for a better mutual understanding, and developing possibilities for resolving conflicts.

6. Interdisciplinarity and the interculturality of interculturality research

Interculturality research can only be productive in an interdisciplinary approach. Since interculturality research extends to all aspects of our lives, it must incorporate a wide variety of scientific disciplines. Since individual perspective is influenced by cultural traditions and historic prerequisites even in scientific research, representatives of different cultural traditions should be included in interculturality research wherever possible in order to obtain intersubjectively plausible results.

7. Intercultural competence

Practical interculturality research contributes in important ways to developing intercultural competence, i.e., those various areas of competence that allow for lessening conflict, strengthening cooperation, and ensuring mutual enrichment in intercultural encounters. That includes fundamental social and communicative competence; language skills and knowledge about the specific symbols and conventions of the cultures involved; and attitudes such as open-mindedness for others, focusing of understanding, and willingness to compromise.