The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Dr. Milton Bennett as a framework to explain the experience of people he observed over the course of months and sometimes years in intercultural workshops, classes, exchanges, and graduate programs. It appeared that these learners confronted cultural difference in some predictable ways as they acquired more intercultural competence. Employing concepts from cognitive psychology and constructivism, he organized these observations into six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference. The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's *experience of cultural difference* becomes more sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations potentially increases. Bennett assumed that each stage was indicative of a particular worldview structure, and that certain kinds of cognitive processing, attitudes, and behaviors would typically be associated with each such configuration of worldview. In other words, the DMIS is not a model of attitude change or of skill acquisition. Rather, it is a model of the development of worldview structure.

The first three DMIS stages are *ethnocentric*, meaning that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way. In Denial, one's own culture is experienced as the only real one, and consideration of other cultures is avoided by maintaining psychological and/or physical isolation from differences. In Defense, one's own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one, and cultural difference is denigrated. In Minimization, elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal, so that despite acceptable surface differences with other cultures, deep down those cultures are seen as essentially similar to one's own.

The second three DMIS stages are *ethnorelative*, meaning that one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. In Acceptance, other cultures are experienced as equally complex but different constructions of reality. In Adaptation, one attains the ability to shift perspective in and out of another cultural worldview; thus, one's experience potentially includes the different cultural experience of someone from another culture. In Integration, one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.

In general, the ethnocentric stages can be seen as ways of *avoiding cultural difference*, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance. The ethnorelative stages are ways of *seeking cultural difference*, either by accepting its importance, by adapting one's perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of one's identity.

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THEORETICAL SUMMARY

The DMIS is a stage model of cognitive development based on personal construct theory and its extension, radical constructivism (Watzlawick, 1984). Personal construct theory was formulated by George Kelly (1963), who held that experience is a function of our categorization, or *construing*, of events. According to this theory,

> A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them..., he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and re-construing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life (p. 73).

In other words, if we have no way of construing an event, we will not experience it. Stated differently, the existence of phenomena in a worldview depends on the extent to which we can discriminate those particular phenomena. This idea is parallel to one stated by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) in his work on linguistic relativity:

> The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds... (p. 213).

As summarized by the biological constructivist Humberto Maturana (1988), our experiential world is filled not only with the evolutionarily constructed realities of physical survival, but also with the linguistically constructed realities of so-

cial interaction. Just as our physical experience is guided by a sensory structure supplied by evolution, so our social experience is similarly guided by the linguistic structures supplied to us by our cultures. The appreciation of how sensory and social experience interact lies at the heart of the DMIS.

As described by the DMIS, individuals can generally progress from ethnocentrism, where they experience events in their own culture as central to reality, to ethnorelativism, where they can experience events in the context of their own and other cultures. In ethnocentrism, people's perceptual systems are less sensitive to cultural differences. Conversely, in ethnorelativism, cultural differences are more likely to be discriminated.

In the earliest ethnocentric stage (Denial), other cultures are either not discriminated at all, or they are construed in rather vague ways. As a result, cultural difference is either not experienced at all, or it is experienced as associated with a kind of undifferentiated *other* such as "foreigner" or "immigrant." In later ethnocentric stages, other cultures are discriminated in more complex ways, but they still do not appear as complex as one's own. Thus, other cultures are experienced as less "real" than one's own, and cultural difference is labeled as threatening (Defense) or superficial (Minimization).

In the first ethnorelative stage (Acceptance), other cultures are construed as equally as complex as one's own. As a result, events that are constructed in other cultures may be experienced as equally "real" as those belonging to one's own culture. In the later ethnorelative stages, behavior (Adaptation) and then identity (Integration) is attached to this experience, yielding intercultural competence.

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1. *This is in contrast with, for instance, Bhawuk & Brislin's (1992) measure of intercultural sensitivity, which focuses on behaviors associated with individualism and collectivism and the self-reported intention of the respondent to modify his/her behavior when moving from one culture to another.*

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE DMIS

Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity is an explanation, based on more than twenty years of empirical observation, of how people develop intercultural competence. As such, the DMIS is representative of "grounded theory," wherein "theory is derived inductively from intense prior study of the actual empirical data the theory attempts to explain" (Bailey, 1994).

There are several assumptions underlying the DMIS that are related to how it is measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory. First, Bennett (1986, 1993) suggests that his intercultural sensitivity model captures the individual's experience of cultural difference, not objective behavior[1]. In this sense, the model is phenomenological in nature.

Second, Bennett views intercultural sensitivity in developmental terms rather than static terms. Intercultural sensitivity is conceptualized as a continuum ranging from a more ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative worldview. The model implies that progression along the continuum can be facilitated through training and education. While there may be retreats in development (particularly from Minimization to Defense), "each stage is meant to characterize a treatment of cultural difference that is fairly consistent for a particular individual at a particular point of development. . ." (p. 27).

Third, the model offers a phenomenological explanation of how individuals construe their world in terms of dealing with cultural differences between themselves as members of a social/cultural group and others as members of social/cultural groups. This is important, for an individual's orientation towards cultural differences exists in terms of his/her social identifications, which are based on group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). More specifically, the model describes an individual's generalized perspective, based on ingroup/outgroup distinctions, towards peoples and cultures which are seen as different from his/her group.

Finally, the applicability of the measuring instrument is fundamentally grounded on the DMIS assumption that ingroup/outgroup categorization is a universal cognitive function. At the broadest level, an individual's orientation toward differences can be framed in terms of the largest salient social category, which is usually national identity.[2] Thus, at the most basic level, individuals have salient ingroup/outgroup distinctions between their own culture (e.g., the United States) and other cultures generally (e.g., foreign countries and people).

More specific ingroup/outgroup distinctions can be made regarding one's national culture (e.g., the United States) and a specific target national culture (e.g., Japan). Such distinctions also can include co-cultural groupings within a larger social unit (e.g., European American/Latino American; African American/Asian American; Male/Female).

Theoretically, Bennett's model suggests considerable overlap among these various social categories. That is, it is argued that individuals tend to maintain consistency in the manner in which they construe social reality vis-a-vis group-based differences. Therefore, an individual will tend to maintain a consistent developmental stage in his/her orientation toward either national or co-cultural differences. As Bennett (1993) states, "new cultural differences, *once they are defined as cultural*, will be treated in more or less the same way as familiar differences" (p. 27). Therefore, a person in one developmental stage in his/her orientation toward cultural differences will tend to view differences encountered from another new social category from a similar orientation. Further, moving from one developmental stage to another vis-a-vis one social group (e.g., Asian Americans) will tend to lead to a reevaluation of other group categories (e.g., a reassessment of one's orientations toward Latino Americans, Koreans, and people from other cultures more generally). Within this theoretical context, the IDI is designed to use the broadest self-attributed social category in contrast to all other cultures as an indicator of how cultural difference in general is construed. Typically, this broadest level is a national or ethnic cultural identification, but it might be social class, sexual orientation, or some other cultural grouping.

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2. *In some cases, the largest salient category might be a supranational ethnic group, such as Arab or Chinese, that transcends several national groups. In other cases, the largest salient category might be an intranational ethnicity, such as Malay, despite the existence of a larger national group.*

THE SIX STAGES OF THE DMIS

The focus of the IDI and Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity is on the role "cultural difference" plays in one's interactions with others. These six stages of intercultural sensitivity describe the various ways in which people construe cultural differences (for a fuller explanation of these stages, see M. J. Bennett, 1993).

Bennett proposes two broad categories (ethnocentric and ethnorelative orientations), each with three stages which characterize individuals' orientations toward cultural differences.

Ethnocentric Stages

An *ethnocentric orientation* is based on the assumption "that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality" (M. J. Bennett, 1986, p. 33) and involves the interpretation of events and behavior from one's own cultural viewpoint. Operating from an essentially monocultural perspective, the meaning a person may give to cultural differences can range from Denial, to Defense, to Minimization.

Denial is the most basic stage of ethnocentrism and reflects an orientation which assumes there are no real differences among people from different cultures. Sometimes circumstances of physical or social isolation from people who are culturally different can reinforce selective perception; whereby a person sees what he/she wants to see and does not see what he/she is unaccustomed to perceiving. For instance, a person with a predominantly Denial worldview might attend only to familiar social cues and assume that his/her relationship with host nationals is excellent, when in fact the host nationals might be broadcasting dissatisfaction via a culturally different set of cues that are not comprehendible in the Denial worldview. Denial is likely to manifest first as *disinterest*, where cultural difference is ignored as irrelevant. However, to maintain Denial, people may need to engage in conscious separation: "the intentional erection of physical or social barriers to create distance from cultural difference" (M. J. Bennett, 1986, p. 35). Separate living arrangements for people who are culturally different ensures an *avoidance of interaction* and the perpetuation of only minimal capacity for perceiving and experiencing the differences.

The second ethnocentric stage is *Defense*, which refers to a more explicit recognition of differences coupled with more overt attempts at erecting defenses against them. In this state, differences are not only viewed suspiciously; they are considered threatening to one's self-esteem and identity. Experience of cultural difference is polarized around either the inferiority of other cultures or the superiority of one's own culture. While one or the other of these forms may be emphasized, they both betray the underlying polarization of experience.

An alternative form of Defense is what Bennett calls *Reversal*, the "denigration of one's own culture and an attendant assumption of superiority of a different culture" (M. J. Bennett, 1986, p. 41). This worldview may be associated with people in the throes of their first positive experience with another culture (e.g. U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers) or with people who want to be perceived as proponents of a culture group other than their own (e.g. European American women advocating African Americans issues). The polarized structure of this worldview is the same as that of Defense, only with the poles reversed.

The third stage of development, *Minimization*, acts as a kind of transition between the polarization of difference in Defense and the nonevaluative recognition of difference in Acceptance. The Minimization worldview over-generalizes similarities between self and other, allowing cultural differences to be trivialized and therefore rendered "harmless." Bennett (1986, 1993) identifies two Minimization forms: (1) *human similarity* (or "physical universalism"), which views all cultures as "merely elaboration of fundamental biology" (M. J. Bennett, 1993, p. 42), and (2) *universal values* (or "transcendent universalism"), which suggests all human beings are or should be subject to a single, transcendent, and universal imperative or entity. Minimization counters the more virulent form of ethnocentrism found in Defense, but the worldview is still theoretically ethnocentric in that it treats its own standards as central to the reality of all people.

Ethnorelative Stages

An *ethnorelative orientation* represents a fundamental shift in mindset from the unconscious ethnocentric assumption that one's own culture is (or should be) the exclusive definer of reality to a more conscious assumption that one's own culture is one among many viable constructions of reality. Or, perhaps in more familiar terms, this orientation

involves "the assumption that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context" (M. J. Bennett, 1993, p. 46) It is quite possible that one may continue to prefer one's own culture and even dislike some other cultures while maintaining ethnorelativism.

THE FIRST ETHNORELATIVE STAGE, *Acceptance*, involves an acknowledgment that identifying significant cultural differences is crucial to understanding human interaction. The *recognition of alternative cultural behavior* involves an acceptance of deep cultural differences in languaging, nonverbal behavior, and styles of thinking and communicating. The *recognition of alternative cultural values* involves an acceptance of how "goodness" is assigned to different ways of being in the world. Acceptance does not mean "agreement," so it is possible that one can accept the existence of an alternative value while still feeling that the value is inappropriate or even dangerous.

The second ethnorelative stage, *Adaptation*, involves a more proactive effort on the part of an individual to use cultural differences and intercultural skills in ways which maximize his/her understanding and relationships with people from other cultures. This does NOT mean a person "assimilates" to the dominant pattern by giving up his/her own cultural values, beliefs, or practices. Rather, it represents an expansion of one's perspective and skills to incorporate other ways of communicating.

One form of Adaptation involves the taking of alternative perspective, or *cognitive frame-shifting.* This is a kind of empathy that allows one to create an experience more like that of people from the different culture. Adaptation can also involve *behavioral code-shifting,* which refers to the enactment of alternative experience. While frame-shifting involves a temporary shift in perspective that permits an individual to experience some aspect of the foreign culture in a way which is different from what is provided by his/her cultural background, code-shifting represents a capacity for responding to the world from another frame of reference.

When one or more alternative cultural frames of reference are readily available in one's worldview, the worldview can be termed "bicultural," or, more generally, "pluralistic." Personal plural-ism in this sense tends to be experienced by individuals "as a part of their normal selves" (M. J. Bennett, 1993, p. 55), and "natural" behavior which is appropriate to the other culture is generated. For example, a Japanese manager who decides he or she will handle a business meeting in an "American" fashion (using brainstorming, active verbal participation, and confrontation) and then later decides to communicate with a subordinate in a more "Japanese style" may well be demonstrating an ability to incorporate various cultural styles into his/her own behavioral repertoire.

The final ethnorelative stage is *Integration* and describes the effort to integrate disparate aspects of one's cultural identity into a new whole. The need for this effort arises when there is significant pluralism in the worldview and one's sense of identity does not fit into any one cultural frame. J. M. Bennett (1993) refers to this condition as "cultural marginality," where cultural identity exists on the margin of two or more cultures. Cultural marginality is particularly obvious among global nomads and long-term expatriates, but it can also be seen among people who must adapt to a different, dominant society

Constructive marginality refers to the experience of incorporating cultural difference into identity, thus enabling people to move among cultural frames while maintaining an integrated sense of self. Not only is this a "constructive" ability for intercultural relations, but it involves "constructing identity" from moment to moment.

An alternative to the constructive form of Integration is *encapsulated marginality.* This worldview has the same configuration of Integration, but identity remains "stuck" on the margins of the various cultural frames. The experience of this condition is one of alienation and rootlessness associated with a fragmented identity. People with an encapsulated marginality worldview may be quite good at moving among cultures, but they have trouble maintaining consistency in their personal and career decisions (J.M. Bennett, 1993).