

A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

The key to the development of the sensitivity and the skills necessary for intercultural communication resides first in the vision [or perception] that each person has when faced with cultural difference.

Bennett, 1986¹

The stages of development of intercultural sensitivity provide elements for observations that can serve to diagnose the position of an individual on the matter of cultural difference. Difference is at the centre of the development of intercultural sensitivity. The stages of reaction to difference are more ethnocentric; there, difference is perceived as immutable and threatening. The stages of openness to difference are ethnorelativist and proactive; here difference is perceived as malleable, as a source of renewal, of equilibrium.

Bennett offers us a conceptual tool we can use to situate certain personal reactions so that we can better discern the criteria for a genuine adaptation to another culture. Bennett's stages are an interesting tool for understanding some emotional movement and classic reactions to culture shock. The typology of the six stages is presented in a linear continuum, which might induce us to think that the development of intercultural sensitivity follows a continuous line of progress. We must therefore pay attention to the inevitable movement back and forth between the stages of openness and frequent regressions to stages of resistance and hostility. The continuum of the stages is not static, and it may happen that individuals will evolve and regress alternately, depending on the circumstances.

The first three stages are denial [there is no difference], defence [against the difference] and minimization [of the difference]; they are more ethnocentric, while the second three stages are acceptance [a new way of seeing], adaptation [a new way of acting] and integration [a new way of being]; these stages are ethnorelativist.

¹ Milton J. Bennett, *A developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity*, Intercultural Journal of Intercultural Relations, vol. 10, n° 2, New York, 1986.

The stages of development of intercultural sensitivity

Description of the stages

The following grid is based on Bennett's work and provides a means for observing the interior development that is cultural openness. This grid is one of a number of means to observe the process of cultural openness, and cannot be used to make judgements about this person. It is simply a tool for diagnosing the position of an individual in response to cultural difference. The continuum of stages is not static, and individuals may alternately evolve and regress, depending on circumstances. This framework functions as an indicator of attitudes, and has the limits inherent in any grid or tool of this kind.

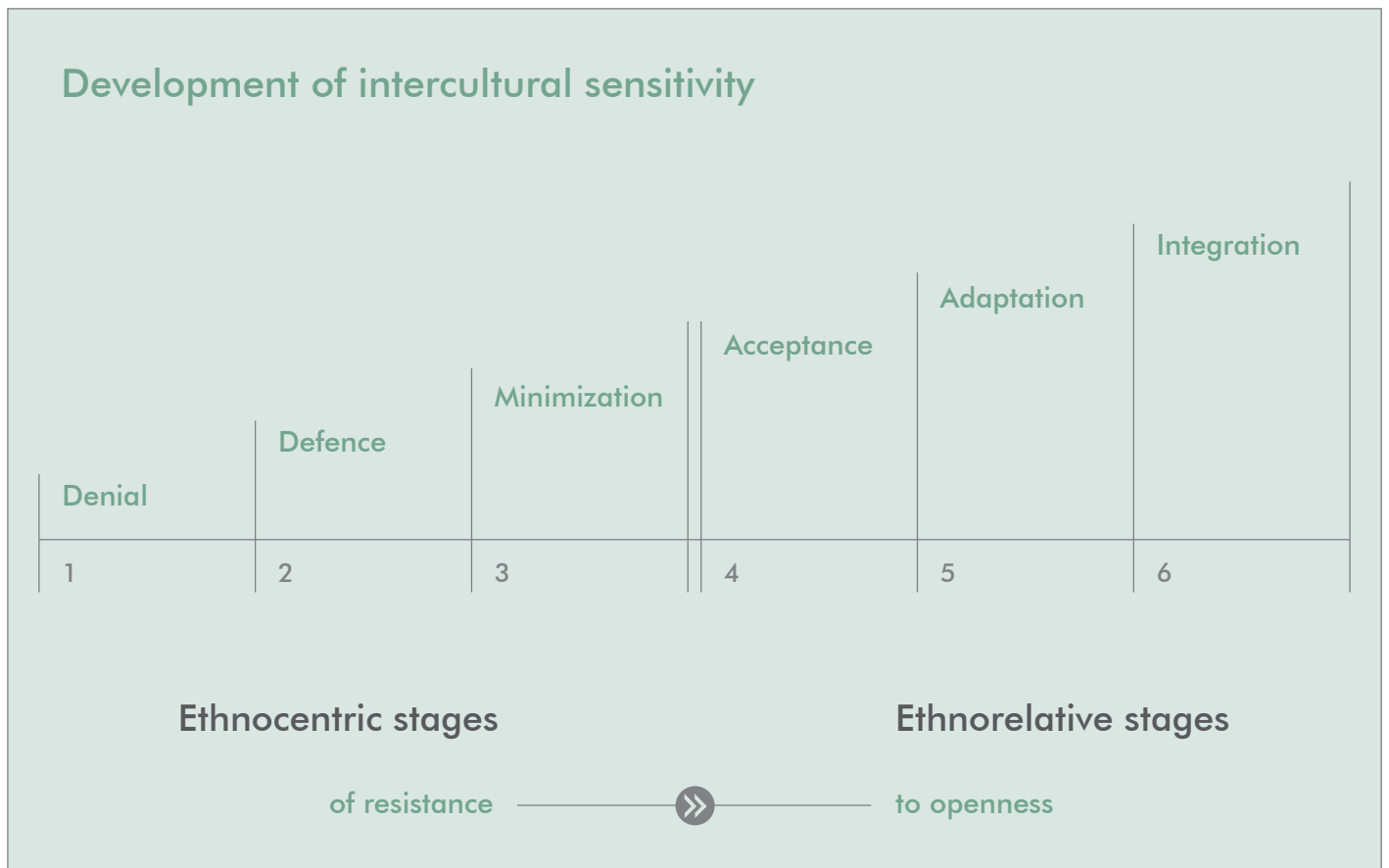


Diagram 1: experiencing difference

1 | Denial

Denial represents the lowest degree of openness to cultural differences. One is quite simply unaware of their existence, or else perceives them on a very general level: this is what results from a physical or social isolation from such differences. As such, this position represents the ultimate ethnocentrism, where a person's own vision of the world is never challenged and is at the centre of all reality.

A more widespread form of Denial could be labelled "parochialism,"—a more or less narrow vision of the world. This state of mind reflects a limited degree of contact with cultural differences, characterized by discomfort, or by the fact of finding bizarre what is different. Parochialism is characterized by the use of very broad categories to classify difference, categories so wide that there is minimal perception of difference without an effort to make distinctions. An example of this category would be recognition that Asians are different from Westerners, without recognizing that Asian cultures differ among themselves.

In these extreme cases of Denial, cultural difference is attributed to a sub-human status. Such was apparently the case when we consider the attitude of the first white pioneers to the North American Indians. At this stage, one does not feel threatened by difference, one is simply unaware that they exist, or they never reach the point where they challenge our view of the world.

2 | Defence

This second stage represents a development of sensitivity as compared to Denial, since it is the result of a fairly intense perception of differences as something threatening.

The most common form of Defence is the denigration of differences. We generally recognize this phenomenon in the creation of negative stereotypes, where every member of a culturally distinct group is regarded as having undesirable characteristics which are attributed to the entire group. This denigration can be linked to race, gender or any other indicator of difference assumed. Here, we are considering it as a stage and not as an isolated act. An observation that corroborates this opinion is that the people who denigrate one particular group are equally likely to denigrate others. Although the denigrator may be poorly informed, it is not ignorance but rather ethnocentrism that explains his defensive attitude.

Another form of the Defence stage is the postulate of cultural superiority. Rather than denigrating a culture, one simply assumes that one's own culture is at the apex of some evolutionary project. Such a manoeuvre automatically assigns an inferior status to those who are different. It is a stage of great insecurity in the face of differences, since they let us glimpse the possibility that our culture is not the only possible view of the world. At a more advanced stage of Defence, we consider that the other cultures are quite simply inferior to ours, on a continuum of which we are the apogee.

3 | Minimization

This third and last of the ethnocentric stages is the last attempt to preserve the centrality of one's own world view. It is an effort to bury difference under the weight of cultural similarities—the intensity of the experience can be such to lead the individual to seek refuge. Persons at this stage are seeking a peace or comfort that is impossible to feel in the "Defence" stage. At this stage, **it is assumed that all mankind is ruled by common basic principles** that guide values and behaviours.

People who adopt this point of view generally approach intercultural situations with the assurance that a simple awareness of the fundamental patterns of human interaction will be sufficient to assure the success of the communication. Such a viewpoint is ethnocentric because it presupposes that the fundamental categories of behaviour are absolute and that these categories are in fact our own! In this contact, differences are only variations on a theme common to all cultures.

At this stage, cultural difference is recognized and tolerated up to a certain point. On the other hand, these differences are perceived either as being superficial or as likely to be an obstacle to communication. This is clear from the fact that, at this stage, it is assumed that communication is based on a common and universal set of rules and principles. Although more cultural sensitivity is manifest at this stage than at the preceding stages, it is still not possible to enter as fully into intercultural understanding as the people passing through this stage expect.

4 | Acceptance

Between the stages of Minimization and Acceptance, there is a change of gears that radically alters people's attitude toward differences. This passage is characterized by a **new way of seeing** cultures as fluid and dynamic, rather than rigid and static.

The transition is marked by a passage from seeing differences as things to seeing them as processes. From an ethnorelativist point of view, people do not have a behaviour, but rather they behave. More profoundly, people do not have values, but they assign value to something. This subjective reinterpretation leads away from a static vision of culture such as defined by Hall. At this stage, people are also perceived as being, in a certain way, co-creators [Bergers & Luckman, 1967] of their own reality. This vision of a cultural reality that is both consensual and mutable [in movement] provides the foundation of ethnorelativism, and is consequently essential for a broader development of intercultural sensitivity.

It is possible at this stage to imagine other cultural frames of reference than our own, even though we may not always understand them in all their complexity. People who are at the stage of Acceptance seek to explore differences and no longer perceive them as threatening. They accept the fact that people can have cultural frames of reference different from theirs, and they take pleasure in that fact. We recognize them from their eager questioning of people from the other culture, which reflects a real desire to be informed, and not to confirm prejudices. The stage of Acceptance marks an openness in the way we see differences. The key words of this stage are "getting to know" or "learning."

5 | Adaptation

Accepting cultural differences as not being fixed, as described above, means we can change our behaviour and our thinking. The ability to temporarily modify the way we habitually see things is at the heart of intercultural communication. In an intercultural context, changing how we process reality is the sign of a growth in cultural sensitivity.

The commonest form of Adaptation is empathy. As Bennett defines it here, empathy implies a temporary change of the frame of reference where we perceive situations as if we were the other person. When that other person has a vision of the world somewhat different from ours, the empathy approaches a change in cultural vision. Generally, it is partial empathy, one that extends only to the spheres pertinent to the communication situation. The empathetic behaviour manifests itself in actions more appropriate in the target culture than in our own culture. These actions may be simply mental, such as the formulation of acceptable questions, or they may include the ability to generate coordinated verbal and non-verbal behaviours that a member of the target culture would perceive as appropriate.

Adaptation to cultural difference follows Acceptance and marks a change at the level of **how a person acts**. People who move through this stage understand the frame of reference of the other culture and are capable of acting accordingly: they are able to empathize with people from the other culture. At an advanced stage of Adaptation, people are cultural pluralists, because they are capable of acting within more than one cultural frame of reference. They have learned a spontaneous decoding of the standards and values that explain a behaviour in its cultural logic. Cultural pluralism can also be considered as an ability to empathize that has become habitual.

In summary, adaptation to differences as a stage in the development of intercultural sensitivity translates into a person's ability to act in an ethnorelative manner. This ability to act outside our own cultural framework is based on a dynamic vision of difference [acceptance] and is at the heart of intercultural communication. Other forms of adaptive behaviour, such as assimilation or the pluralism born from lengthy stays in a foreign culture may appear to be intercultural sensitivity, but in themselves they reveal a form of mimicry and lack the developmental basis necessary for ethnorelativism.

This stage shows a sense of security about the original culture: we can adapt without feeling threatened. The key word of this stage is "understand."

6 | Integration

Integration is the last stage of openness to cultural difference. It is the sense that underlies Adler's description [1977] of the multicultural person: that person "is not simply a person sensitive to several different cultures. Rather, it is a person who is constantly in the process of becoming part of, and yet at the same time feels himself outside a given cultural context." This develops only after prolonged periods living in various locations where the person comes into contact with significant cultural differences.

In the language of this model, a person who has integrated the difference is one who can perceive differences as process, who can adapt to those differences and who furthermore can define his own culture in a number of different ways.

An intercultural sensitivity skill relating to this stage is the ability to evaluate a phenomenon in terms of a given cultural context. This ability, known as contextual evaluation, enables us to reconsider judgements we have suspended at the Acceptance stage without, however, falling back into ethnocentrism. It is in regard to such or such cultural reference framework that we evaluate actions. The same action can thus be judged as potentially "good" [Culture A] or "bad" [Culture B]. In terms of individual ethics, that implies that actions are evaluated in relation to a cultural context we have ourselves established. It is in regard to such and such cultural reference framework that we evaluate actions.

At this stage, "the individual integrates a number of frames of reference into his own way of being. His system of values is drawn from these different cultural frameworks, but he does not adopt any of them in their entirety." The fact of not identifying absolutely with any other culture may be positive. This constructive marginality can become a valuable tool in cultural mediation. At this culminating point of intercultural sensitivity, which is the Integration stage, a person lives cultural difference as an essential and stimulating aspect of life.

Evolutionary strategies

Bennett proposes evolutionary strategies to promote transitions from one stage to the next. Briefly noted, they are:

- | From Denial to Defence: an awareness of difference.
- | From Defence to Minimization: depolarizing negative judgements, introducing the positive aspects common to all cultures, that is, the similarities.
- | From Minimization to Acceptance: grasping the importance of cultural difference.
- | From Acceptance to Adaptation: encouraging intensive exploration and research [asking questions to learn to know the other cultural framework]
- | From Adaptation to Integration: anything that favours the development of empathy with the other culture as well as the ability to communicate interculturallly.
- | Integration without disintegration: clarifying or defining a personal ethical framework, acting as cultural mediator where the fact of not identifying completely with any particular culture will be considered as a strength and not a weakness.

Attitudes Towards Cultural Difference

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Ethnocentrism

Stage 1 - Denial (deny difference)

- don't believe in cultural difference
- "people who behave differently don't know any better"
- tend to impose their own value system on others, knowing that they're right and other people are confused
- think they behave in a natural and normal way; different ways are wrong and misguided
- not threatened by cultural differences because they don't accept them
- generally have had limited contact with people different from themselves, and have no experiential basis for believing in other cultures

Stage 2 - Defence (accept but demonize differences)

- have had indication that their value system may not be absolute - and they're not happy about it
- believe in cultural differences and have accepted reality of it, but are deeply threatened by it
- believe that other cultures are decidedly inferior
- know better than to try to impose their values on others, but view other cultures negatively and prefer to have little or no contact with those who are different

Stage 3 - Minimization (trivialize difference)

- still threatened by difference so they try to minimize it, but they don't think those who are different are inferior, misguided, or otherwise unfortunate
- believe that differences are real but not especially deep or significant
- "as different as people are, they are still more similar than dissimilar"
- we may be different on the surface, but underneath we share many of the same values and beliefs

Ethnorelativism

Stage 4 - Acceptance (neutral about difference)

- accept difference as deep and legitimate
- know other people are genuinely different from them and accept the inevitability of other value systems and behavioural norms
- still may find some of these behaviours hard to deal with or accept, but are not threatened by them, and don't judge them as wrong or bad
- don't normally adopt many of these behaviours themselves, or adjust their own behaviours to be more culturally sensitive, but are tolerant and have a sympathetic attitude
- neutral about cultural difference

Stage 5 - Adaptation (difference is a positive thing)

- behaviour changes as well as attitudes
- willing and able to change their own behaviour to conform to different norms
- able to empathize with people from different cultures
- they do not give up their own or birth culture's values and beliefs but they do integrate aspects of other cultures into it

Stage 6 - Integration (I can become different and still be me)

- become bicultural, effortlessly adjusting behaviour to suit the culture of the people they're with—"style switching"

Reference: Bennett, Milton J. "Towards Ethnorelativism: A Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" in Education for the Intercultural Experience. Paige, R M (ed) Yarmouth ME: Intercultural Press. 1993.

