

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Dr. Milton Bennett (1986, 1993) as a framework to explain the reactions of people to cultural difference. In both academic and corporate settings, he observed that individuals confronted cultural difference in some predictable ways as they learned to become more competent intercultural communicators. Using 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 complex and sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations increases. Each stage indicates a particular cognitive structure that is expressed in certain kinds of attitudes and behavior related to cultural difference. By recognizing the underlying cognitive orientation toward cultural difference, predictions about behavior and attitudes can be made and education can be tailored to facilitate development into the next stage.

The first three DMIS stages are *ethnocentric*, meaning that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way:

Denial of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only real one. Other cultures are avoided by maintaining psychological and/or physical isolation from differences. People at Denial generally are disinterested in cultural difference, although they may act aggressively to eliminate a difference if it impinges on them.

Defense against cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one. The world is organized into "us and them," where "we" are superior and "they" are inferior. People at Defense are threatened by cultural difference, so they tend to be highly critical of other cultures, regardless of whether the others are their hosts, their guests, or cultural newcomers to their society.

Minimization of cultural difference is the state in which elements of one's own cultural world view are experienced as universal. Because these absolutes obscure deep cultural differences, other cultures may be trivialized or romanticized. People at Minimization expect similarities, and they may become insistent about correcting others' behavior to match their expectations.

The second three DMIS stages are *ethnorelative*, meaning that one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures.

Acceptance of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Acceptance does not mean agreement—cultural difference may be judged negatively—but the judgment is not ethnocentric. People at Acceptance are curious about and respectful toward cultural difference.

Adaptation to cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture. One's worldview is expanded to include constructs from other worldviews. People at Adaptation are able to look at the world "through different eyes" and may intentionally change their behavior to communicate more effectively in another culture.

Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. People at Integration often are dealing with issues related to their own "cultural marginality." This stage is not necessarily better than Adaptation in most situations demanding intercultural competence, but it is common among non-dominant minority groups, long-term expatriates, and "global nomads."

The DMIS has been used with great success for the last fifteen years to develop curriculum for intercultural education and training programs. Content analysis research has supported the relevance of the stage descriptions and has suggested that a more rigorous measurement of the underlying cognitive states could yield a powerful tool for personal and group assessment.

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References

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