



A Model for Personal Change: Developing Intercultural Sensitivity

By Barbara R. Deane

Does increasing diversity in the workplace require people to have greater cultural sensitivity to each other? There is little doubt that the answer is yes. But then you may ask: "How do I define cultural sensitivity and how do I integrate such a concept into a training program?" This article will give you some ideas.

The model, developed by Milton Bennett,* tries to explain how people make sense of differences. This model is valuable because it shows a progression of stages people may go through, including strategies for helping people move from one stage to another. Some people may stop in a stage and not progress further; others may occasionally move backwards.

To help you think visually, we placed a drawing of the model at the end of this document. The model is divided into "Ethnocentric Stages" and "Ethnorelative Stages." "Ethnocentric" may be defined as using your own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously. "Ethnorelative" is a word coined to express the opposite of ethnocentric; it refers to a person who is comfortable with many standards and customs and who can adapt his/her behavior and judgments to many interpersonal settings. Here are the stages in the model:

Denial. Example: "Tokyo is no different than New York, lots of cars and tall buildings." A person in the Denial Stage has a few categories to notice differences. Also, a person in this stage may attribute sub-human qualities to those from different cultures and regard them with extreme prejudice. **Strategies:** The use of non-threatening cultural awareness activities is appropriate (ethnic luncheons,

entertainment by cultural groups, travelogues, talks on history, exhibits). The purpose is to help people begin to recognize differences.

Defense. Example: "Women are not aggressive enough, they'll never fit in at this level." People in the Defense Stage make statements that indicate they feel threatened. The most common reaction at this stage is to denigrate the differences or to create negative stereotypes. An alternative response in this stage is to promote one's cultural superiority. **Strategies:** Emphasize the things cultures have in common, and what is "good" in all cultures. To argue that cultures are not good or bad, just different, is not appropriate at this stage. A few people may reverse and denigrate members of their own group; for example, an American whose exclusive concern is with "the ugly American." Since focus on commonalities is the goal, look for similar examples of ethnocentrism in other cultures. Be aware that some people may want to slip back into Denial because on the surface it feels more comfortable than at the Defense stage.

Minimalization. Example: "The best thing to do when being interviewed by a Japanese employer is just be yourself." People in the Minimalization Stage believe that cultural differences are just superficial; the basic qualities of being human will suffice. Western values of individuality, openness and honesty contribute to this view. Sometimes people with overseas experience find a haven in this stage – it sounds cultural sensitive and it allows them to avoid feelings of incompetence in the face of many cultural unknowns. Moving into the next stage represents "a major conceptual shift," from an ethnocentric position that relies on simple

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principles (i.e. either/or) to an ethnorelative stage where answers are not so clear. **Strategies:** For Westerners, handling this shift inductively seems best. Use simulation exercises, personal stories, "representatives" from other cultures (choose carefully) to show how behavior can be interpreted differently. Acknowledge the discomfort people may feel during this shift; it is normal.

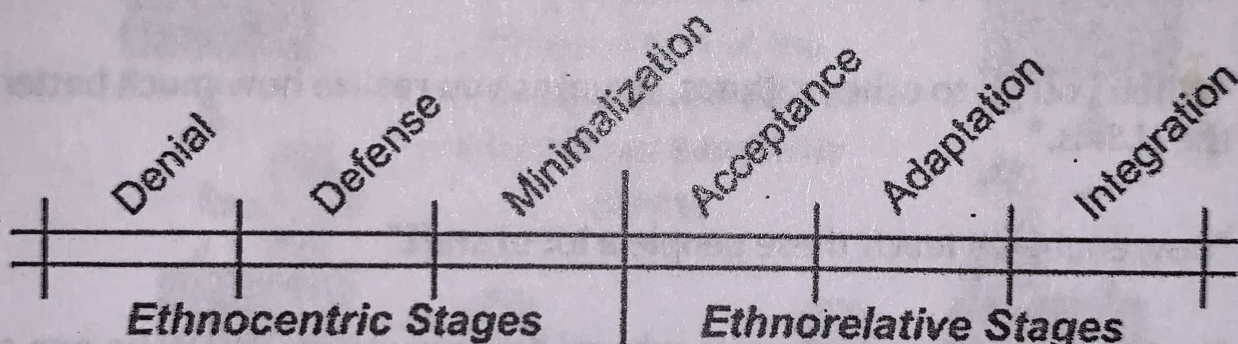
Acceptance. Example: "I know my boss, a black woman, and I, a white male, have very different life experiences, but we're learning how to work together." People in the Acceptance Stage enjoy recognizing and exploring differences. They are fairly tolerant of ambiguity and are comfortable knowing there's no one right answer (although there are better answers for particular contexts). **Strategies:** Stress recognition and respect of behavioral differences; focus on verbal and nonverbal communication styles. Emphasize practical application in the form of intercultural communication skills. Encourage the view that what is different is also appropriate. Learning to respect differences distinguishes this stage from the previous one. Moving too quickly to a discussion of values, however, may be threatening and result in a move backward.

Adaptation. Example: "To solve this dispute, I need to change my behavior to account for the difference in status between myself and my Arab colleague." People in the Adaptation Stage can intentionally shift their frame of reference (e.g. consider the greater influence of status in some cultures); they can empathize, or take the other person's perspective. They can choose to act in alternative ways, based on their intercultural perception. People in this stage may be called "bicultural"

Development of Intercultural Sensitivity



Experience of Difference →



First experience is not to experience the difference

Polarization of us/them

False sense of cultural sensitivity, assumes we are all the same.

Growing awareness of one's own culture and recognition of the other.

Recognition that one needs to be effective in interactions with others.

Internalizing two or more cultures - typically takes 3+ years.

Slide 1

Stage 1: Denial

- This stage is often created based on the belief that a person's culture is the only real culture.
- People in this stage often fail to see cultural differences and tend to isolate themselves from other groups (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 155).
- Often times, people that are in the stage of denial are not interested in cultural differences and could care less about people other than the ones that are in their direct culture

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Common phrases used

"All big cities are the same; lots of buildings, too many cars, and McDonald's."
 "With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort."
 "I never experience culture shock"
 "As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem."
 (Bennet, 1993, p. 1)

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How might one help a person who is in this stage?

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Stage 2: Defense

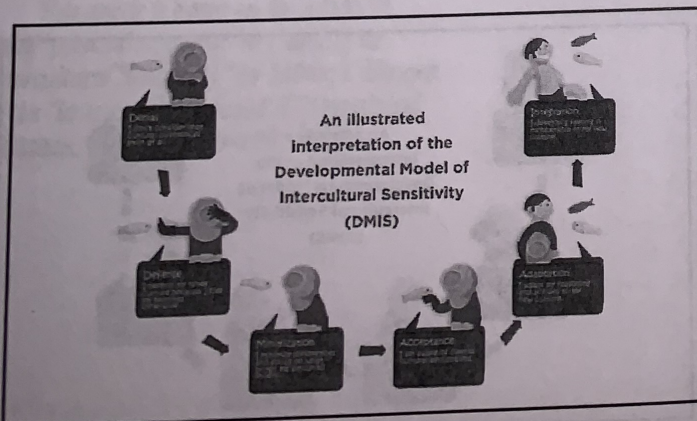
Learners often feel as if their own culture is the only good culture (Bennet, 2011)

This stage often consists of negative stereotyping and **us to them** thinking.

A person is in defense may feel threatened by other cultures and their differences.

People tend to be very critical of other cultures and have a narrow focus on what appropriate behaviors and cultures are correct (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 157).

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Common phrases

"I wish these people would just talk the way we do."

"When you go to other cultures, it makes you realize how much better the U.S. is."

"Boy, could we teach these people a lot of stuff."

→ "I wish I could give up my own cultural background and really be one of these people."

(Bennett, 1993, p. 3)

immature person

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Stage 2

How might one help a person who is in this stage?

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them W/ 8

STAGE 3: MINIMIZATION

During this stage, the learner begins to find commonalities between themselves and people of other cultures.

Superficial cultures are mostly judged during this phase of the model. Some examples of superficial cultures would be eating, money, and many others.

People in this stage begin to recognize that all people are people, whether they have different traditions and cultures or not (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 158).

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Common phrases

"I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture."

"It's a small world after all"

"Technology is bringing cultural uniformity to the developed world."

"No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things."

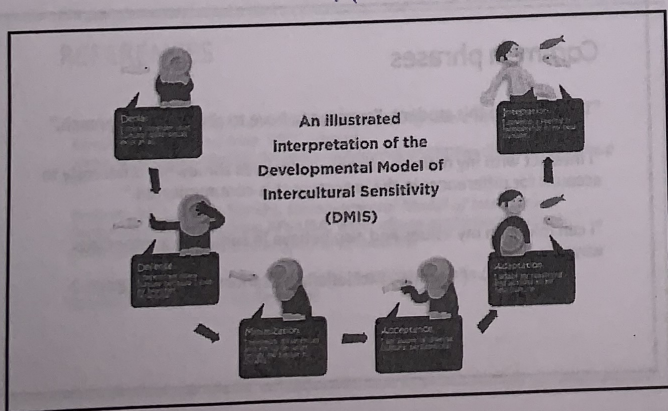
(Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 159)

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STAGE 3: MINIMIZATION

- This stage is often the most difficult to move from because people at this stage think that they are doing okay (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 158). Why so difficult?
- In order to move from this stage, learners need to develop cultural self-awareness and experience difference (Bennett, 1993).
- Learners will also benefit from strengthening listening skills, open-mindedness, and working on the ability to perceive others accurately (Bennett, 1993).

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Stage 4: Acceptance

- During this stage, learners are able to recognize and appreciate cultural difference through both behaviors and values.
- This stage promotes the belief that one's own culture is just one of the many cultures that exists in the world (Bennett, 2011).
- An important aspect of this stage is that people do not necessarily have to agree on anything, they just need to recognize that there are other ways of going about certain situations (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 160).
- People in this stage are often curious about other cultures and have a desire to learn.

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Common phrases

"The more difference the better- more difference results in more creative ideas."

"I always try to study about a new culture before I go there or interact with the people."

(Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 160)

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From acceptance to Adaptation

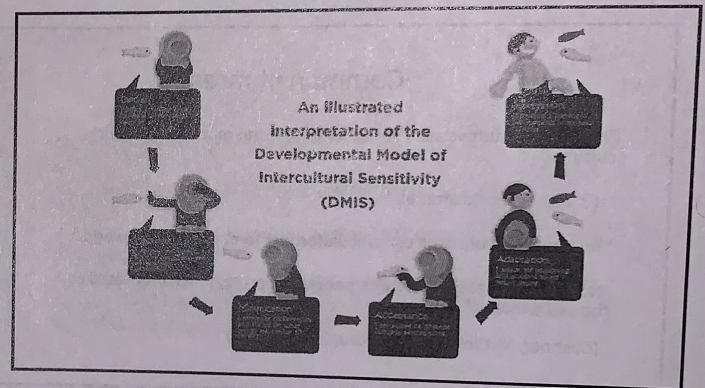
- What do you think is necessary to move forward to the next stage?

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From acceptance to Adaptation

In order to move from this stage, learners need to gain cultural specific knowledge. Learners must also have respect for others' values and beliefs and maintain tolerance of ambiguity (Bennett, 1993, p. 9)

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Stage 5: Adaptation

- learners begin to be more competent in how to communicate with people of other cultures.
- Learners are able to incorporate the world view of others into their own world view.
- A major aspect of this stage is that the learner will be able to see the world through another's "eyes." Because of this perspective, learners can change their behavior in order to communicate more effectively (Bennett, 2011).

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Common phrases

"To really help this student, I'm going to have to change my approach."

"I interact with my male and female colleagues somewhat differently to account for differences in the way respect is communicated."

"I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways."

(Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 164)

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From Adaptation to Integration

- What is necessary?

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From Adaptation to Integration

Learners must be able to experience empathy for other cultures. Learners will also develop risk-taking skills and problem-solving skills. Lastly, learners will need flexibility with other cultures (Bennett, 1993, p. 11)

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Stage 6: Integration

- Rarely do learners achieve this level of cultural sensitivity.
- During integration the learner is able to have other cultural experience move in and out of their own worldview.
- People in this view often maintain a marginal self-identity and view themselves as "in-process" (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 165).
- People that reach integration are often culture mediators. They are able to help others understand different cultures and promote unity between these two cultures (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 165).

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Common phrases

"Sometimes I don't feel like I fit anywhere."

"Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there."

"I feel most comfortable when I'm Bridging differences between the cultures I know."

(Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 165)

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