Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Milton J. Bennett is a grounded theory based on constructivist perception and communication theory. It assumes that the experience of reality is constructed through perception, and that more complex perceptual categories yield more complex (sophisticated) experience. Specifically, the DMIS assumes that we are constructing boundaries of "self" and "other" in ways that guide our experience of intercultural events. The most ethnocentric construction, Denial, is one wherein only vague categories of "other" are available for perceiving people from different cultural contexts. At the other end of the continuum, the most ethnorelative construction of Integration supposes that complex self/other categories are incorporated into one's personal identity and into decision-making regarding ethicality in multicultural relations. This entry describes the theory and application of DMIS to diagnosis and intervention, including some discussion of measuring intercultural sensitivity and the main criticisms of the model and its measurement.

Main Text

Following a process of grounded theory development, the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (Bennett, M., 1986, 2013) codified observations about people who were becoming more competent intercultural communicators in both academic and corporate settings. These initial observations were made for the purpose of determining "what to do next" in intercultural training programs. The idea was to observe the sequence of competence acquisition, and then to apply a coherent theoretical structure that could explain the development in terms of movement through different stages. (The term "stage" referred to sequential positions along a continuum, not discrete conditions.) With that theory in hand, it would be possible to diagnose where people were along the continuum and to facilitate movement in terms of the theoretical structure.

Describing a developmental process required specifying an ultimate goal of intercultural training. Based on the then-prevailing consensus of intercultural practitioners, the goal of training was to enable more competent communication in alternative cultural contexts. Secondary goals included applications of intercultural communication competence to activities such as intercultural mediation and conflict resolution, interethnic (gender, sexual orientation) equity, multicultural team or global organization leadership, multicultural classroom teaching, health care delivery, etc. The original observations that

yielded the DMIS were made strictly in terms of communicative behavior, following Cronen and Pearce (1982); the criterion for judging whether people were more interculturally competent was whether they could "coordinate meaning" across cultural contexts with something approaching the facility they had in their native context(s). In this sense communicative competence as defined by the DMIS follows the lead of linguistic competence – the ability to understand and generate appropriate utterances in context.

If native communicative ability is taken as the criterion for intercultural competence, then the next question might be, 'how does one come to be communicatively competent in one's own culture?' This question led to the use of constructivist perception and communication theory as the explanatory framework. Constructivism in general holds that people's experience is a function of their perceptual organization of reality. Lacking a complete instinctual program, human beings need to internalize the "worldview" of their group and then enact that worldview in ways that maintain it and apply it to novel situations (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Based on particular forms of cultural perception, elaborate human languages and other forms of communication have evolved for adapting to novel and complex situations. Constructivist communicative competence refers to this naturally learned human ability to coordinate meaning and action in complex ways within large groups.

The basic mechanism for internalizing (embodying) worldview is *perception* (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004). Following Piaget, Vygotsky, and other developmentalists (Mooney, 2013) children become more adaptive to their particular circumstances by elaborating perceptual categories of relevant things while leaving irrelevant things either unperceived or only vaguely categorized. For example, pasta is a relevant category for Italian kids, and many of them already know the shapes (e.g. penne or rigatoni) that go with different sauces. Pasta is not very relevant for American kids, and most of them can only use the undifferentiated category of "macaroni." Writ large, culture provides us with a set of these kind of figure/ground distinctions that allow us to co-construct with our compatriots the unique adaptive processes of our group. We assume a general similarity in experiencing the world, and we are relatively adept at taking perspectives of others in the group whose experience differs from ours within defined constraints. Our joint experience is the "feeling of," as in the feeling of being Japanese, or the feeling of being a woman, or the feeling of being black or white in a white-privileged society. We give form to that feeling with our behavior – behavior that manifests in individual ways our collective worldview.

The move from communicative competence in one's own culture to communicative competence across cultures is the key concept for DMIS. It assumes that dealing with *otherness* in complex ways is not a natural or historically important part of any culture's adaptive strategy. As a result, otherness exists in a broad and vaguely defined perceptual category, like macaroni for pasta. Such a perceptual condition is inadequate for communicating effectively with cultural outsiders*,* since it lumps together people of different cultures inappropriately and precludes taking their unique perspectives in any meaningful way. Movement along the continuum from *Ethnocentrism* to *Ethnorelativism* is accomplished through elaborating categories for otherness, so that eventually the perception (and thus the experience) of cultural difference is as complex as that of important events in one's own culture. This ability to have more complex personal experience of otherness is termed *intercultural sensitivity*. Intercultural communicative competence is the forming of intercultural sensitivity into behavior that coordinates meaning across cultural contexts with more or less the same ease that one coordinates within one's own culture. Notable behavioral forms of intercultural sensitivity are *empathy* (the generation of appropriate behavior in alternative contexts); and *meta-coordination* (the "third-culture" contexts that generate value from cultural diversity).

DMIS stages

The DMIS stages (positions) are construed both in terms of basic perceptual structures vis a vis *otherness* and in terms of certain "issues" regarding cultural difference that tend to be related to each of the stages. The names of the stages refer to the issues, while the description of the experience of each

stage refers to its perceptual structure. The first three stages of *Denial, Defense, and Minimization* are *Ethnocentric*; they refer to issues that are associated with experiencing one's own culture as more "central to reality." The last three stages of *Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration* are *Ethnorelative*; they refer to issues associated with experiencing all cultures as alternative ways of organizing reality. Movement through the stages is not inevitable; it depends on the need to become more competent in communicating outside one's primary social context. When that need is established, it is addressed by building more complex perceptual structures that can resolve the increasingly complex issues of dealing with cultural difference.

The DMIS is a culture-general model; when more complex perceptual structures are established for any culture, they apply to all cultures. For instance, greater perceptual sensitivity towards a different national culture group allows more sensitivity towards a different generational or sexual orientation group, assuming that those groups are also defined in cultural terms. Additionally, movement through the stages tends to be one-way; people do not easily become more ethnocentric after having developed ethnorelative perceptual structures. However, people can rather easily retreat from one ethnocentric stage to an earlier one, particularly from *Minimization* to *Defense.*

In addition to its use as an individual diagnostic, the DMIS can be interpreted at an organizational level. More complex organizational structures are parallels to more complex personal perceptual structures. Greater intercultural sensitivity in an organization means that more complex structures are allowing cultural difference to be perceived more fully. The resulting "climate" regarding cultural difference carries the potential for better resolution of the issues associated with multicultural workforces and global operations.

Denial

The default condition of DMIS is the *denial of cultural difference* – the failure to perceive the existence or the relevance of culturally different others. Perceptual categories for *otherness* are not elaborate enough to allow discriminations among different kinds of others, who may be perceived vaguely as "foreigners" or "minorities" or not perceived at all. The constructs available for perceiving one's own culture are far more complex than those available for other cultures, so people experience themselves as more "real" than others – even to the point that others may not seem fully human. People are disinterested or perhaps even hostilely dismissive of intercultural communication. In organizations, *Denial* is a condition wherein there are no structures (policies and procedures) to recognize and deal with cultural diversity.

The issue experienced as *Denial* is created when people who prefer stability (sameness) are forced by some circumstance to become aware of others (differentness). This occurs when, for instance, significant numbers of refugees or immigrants enter a community, or when people must face cultural differences in a changing workforce or globalized organization. Initially, the sameness pole is exaggerated while the differentness pole is suppressed; one's self and compatriots are perceived as complex compared to the simplicity of others. Resolution of the contradiction involves beginning to perceive others in more specific and complex ways. Personally, this occurs when others are personified through media or personal contact. Organizationally, resolution of *Denial* occurs when difference is acknowledged by procedures such as multiple-language forms or incorporating visual diversity into corporate publications.

Defense

When the resolution of *Denial* issues allows it, people can move into the experience of *defense against cultural difference.* The perceptual structure of this stage is a dichotomous categorization of "us and them," where others are perceived more fully than in *Denial* but also in highly stereotyped ways. People at this stage tend to be critical of other cultures and apt to blame cultural difference for general ills of society; they experience "us" as superior and "them" as inferior. A variation of *Defense* is **reversal**, where people switch poles so that "them" are superior and "us" are inferior. People in this form tend to

simplistically romanticize or exotify another culture while being more complexly critical of their own culture. In international contexts, the informal term for *reversal* is "going native." In domestic contexts, the term "false ally" may refer to a dominant-culture member in *reversal* who takes on the cause of "oppression" without much experience or understanding.   An organization indicates *Defense* by rhetoric that exalts the superiority of its national cultural roots and its current organizational culture. Occasionally an organization shows *reversal* by supporting activities for non-dominant others based on simplistic stereotypes (e.g. shopping trips for the assumedly female spouses of conferencing executives, when a) the spouses might not all be female, and b) even if they are female they might not fit the stereotype and could resent having it applied).

The contradiction experienced as *Defense* occurs when "us" and "them" are forced into contact. The greater visibility and exaggerated stereotypes of others generate an experience of threat, fueling red-lining, exclusive membership, and other segregationist strategies. When actual contact is inevitable, focusing on power differences (such as privilege or oppression) supports the polarized *Defense* or *reversal* experiences. Conversely, resolution of *Defense* is accomplished by focusing on commonalities – equal humanity, shared values, etc. In organizations, *Defense* is routinely resolved by team-building exercises that stress mutual dependence and define differences as in-group variations of personality and style.

Minimization
The resolution of "us and them" allows the move to the *minimization of cultural difference*. As the term implies, cultural differences that were initially defined in *Defense* are now minimized in favor of the assumedly more important similarities between self and others. Those similarities are based on the familiar elements of one's own cultural worldview; people assume that their own experiences are shared by others, or that certain basic values and beliefs transcend cultural boundaries and thus apply to everyone (whether they know it or not). The stressing of cross-cultural similarity generates "tolerance," wherein superficial cultural differences are perceived as variations on the shared universal themes of humanity. However, *Minimization* obscures deep cultural differences both for individuals and for organizations. At this stage, organizations tend to exaggerate the benefits of unbiased equal opportunity, thus masking the continued operation of dominant culture privilege. Confrontation with these deeper differences may cause people to retreat to the earlier ethnocentric stage of *Defense*.

The *Minimization* issue for individuals is their desire to project similarity on a wider world and the stubborn resistance of that world to losing its real difference. This means that the more contact people seek out with others in the name of shared values, the more likely it is that they will be forced to confront significant cultural differences. Something similar happens in organizations, where an overstressing of "unity" yields too much uniformity, which forces the organization to decentralize and focus on its diversity, sometimes with the result of divisiveness. In both the individual and organizational cases, resolution of the issue occurs when similarity and difference, unity and diversity, are put into dialectical form: assuming similarity allows us to appreciate differences, and unity provides focus for diversity.

Acceptance
Movement out of the ethnocentric condition of *Minimization* allows cultural difference to be organized into categories that are potentially as complex as one's own. In other words, people become conscious of themselves and others in cultural contexts that are equal in complexity but different in form. The *acceptance of cultural difference* does not mean agreement – cultural difference may be judged negatively – but the judgment is not ethnocentric in the sense that it is not automatically based on deviation from one's own cultural position. For the same reason that an oenophile wants to learn more about wine or a bibliophile wants to finish the novel, people at *Acceptance* are curious about cultures and cultural differences. But their limited knowledge of other cultures and their nascent perceptual flexibility does not allow them to easily adapt their behavior to different cultural contexts. In

organizations, the rhetoric and support structure for "diversity and inclusion" exists at this point of development, but the incorporation of intercultural sensitivity as a criterion for global or multicultural leadership is not yet established.

The challenge (issue) of *Acceptance* is the need to reconcile cultural relativity with ethicality. People at this stage want to be respectful of other cultures, and for that reason they may adopt the naïve and paralytic position of "it's not bad or good, it's just different." However, all behavior demands that judgments be made (including doing nothing), and the demand is to find a basis of judgment that is not ethnocentric in either *Defense* (superiority) or *Minimization* (universalist) terms. One such system that can be applied in both personal and organizational contexts is William Perry's Ethical Scheme (1999). After resolving the ethnocentric ethical positions of dualism and multiplicity, the Scheme demands that decision-makers engage *contextual relativism* – an understanding of "goodness in context" – before they make an ethical commitment.

Adaptation

Resolving the issue of ethicality allows the move to *adaptation to cultural difference.* The perceptual mechanism is that of "perspective taking" or empathy. This is a kind of context-shifting, assumedly enabled by a neurological executive function, that allows one to experience the world "as if" one were participating in a different culture. This imaginative participation generates "feelings of appropriateness" that guide the generation of authentic behavior in the alternative culture. The ultimate example of this shift in cultural terms is biculturalism, a mirror of bilingualism. In either case, the outcome of the context shift is the competent enactment of alternative behavior that is appropriate to the different context. Organizations at this point of development have policies and procedures that are intentionally flexible enough to work without undue cultural imposition in a range of cultural contexts.

The issue of *Adaptation* is authenticity. If people can shift among several cultural contexts, in which contexts do their true identities reside? The resolution of this dilemma lies in the extension of the definition of identity into a more dynamic container – one that can contain a wider repertoire of ways of being in the world. At an organizational level, *Adaptation* is the essence of "inclusion" of both global and domestic diversity into organizational processes.

Integration

The resolution of authentic identity allows for the sustainable *integration of cultural difference* into communication. In this integrated condition, communication can shift from in-context to between-context states, allowing for the meta-coordination of meaning and action that defines intercultural communication. On a personal level, *Integration* is experienced as a kind of developmental liminality, where one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. Cultural liminality can be used to construct cultural bridges and to conduct sophisticated cross-cultural mediation. Organizations at *Integration* encourage the construction of third-culture positions based on mutual adaptation in multicultural work groups, with the anticipation that third-culture solutions generate added value.

<center>**Qualitative Measurements of DMIS**</center>

As constructivist grounded theory, the DMIS for the most part uses qualitative rather than quantitative criteria for assessing its credibility. Unlike the concept of validity in positivist quantitative methodology – the measurement of something "real" – grounded theory depends on theoretical coherence for its credibility. The strength of grounded theory is assessed by its ability to explain observed events within a coherent framework that allows for useful diagnosis. In other words, the validity question is not "is it true," but rather "does it fit with empirical observation and is it useful?" Additionally, the trustworthiness of grounded theory is assessed by its applicability to a reasonably wide range of

contexts, as opposed to a statistical measure of test reliability. By these criteria, DMIS is robust; the model has not typically been criticized for lack of coherence or usefulness.

Assuming that the credibility and trustworthiness of DMIS is accepted, then the most straightforward measurement of intercultural sensitivity is to elicit and interpret descriptions of the experience of cultural difference through verbal interviews or open-ended textual questionnaires. This qualitative approach has been employed since the early days of the DMIS, and researchers have developed many forms of questionnaires and interview schedules using the basic formulation of DMIS stages adapted to various contexts. Following are some examples of DMIS questions, responses, and typical interpretations in a range of personal and organizational contexts.

A question that could elicit personal *Denial* in the healthcare context might be "How relevant have you found cultural difference to be in the delivery of good healthcare at this clinic?" Responses such as "kidneys don't care what culture they're in" indicate that the respondent is not experiencing culture as a very important factor in healthcare. The more that elicited comments stress the relevance or importance of culture to good healthcare, the more resolution of the *Denial* issue of stability/change they indicate, meaning that the respondent is to some extent experiencing cultural differences together with physiological differences in diagnosis and treatment. Shifting emphasis to the organizational level of *Denial* would change the question to something like "What mechanisms such as multiple language forms or on-call cultural specialists are established at the clinic?" The identification of such processes (either through interviewing or other means such as document research) indicates that the organization is acting on the reality of changing social conditions.

A question checking organizational *Minimization* in a corporate context could be "In considering workplace relations, does company policy stress more the shared corporate culture or more the differences represented by different cultural groups of workers? How?" Personally, *Minimization* can be probed by a question such as "In your relationships with people of other cultures, how important is cultural difference as opposed to human similarity?" Low resolution of *Minimization* is indicated by a strong emphasis on the corporate culture or on personal similarity (minimizing the importance of cultural differences). Conversely, describing a balance or reconciliation of unity and diversity would indicate high resolution. The more the issue is resolved, the more respondents are able to simultaneously experience both cultural similarity and cultural difference in cross-cultural situations.

On the Ethnorelative side, a question probing personal *Adaptation* could be "What is an example of how you changed your behavior in a different cultural context to communicate more effectively? How did you know what to do differently?" The failure to provide a substantial example indicates that *Adaptation* is not yet relevant to the respondent. The more substantial the behavior change, particularly if accompanied by a indication of empathy as the basis of the change, the more resolved the issue of authenticity/context-shifting, meaning that respondents are experiencing themselves as having authentic identity in more than one cultural context.

At the organizational level, questions that could show *Integration* in a social service agency might be, "How consistently does the agency use cultural context as a factor in its decision-making," or "How often is intercultural competence used as a criterion for hiring or advancement?" The issue of *Integration* is sustainability, and greater consistency of organization structures incorporating intercultural sensitivity indicate more resolution of that issue, allowing intercultural communication competence to become "the way we do things around here."

<div align="center">Quantitative Measurements of DMIS</div>

Although they represent a paradigm shift from the constructivist roots of grounded theory, various quantitative measures of DMIS have been attempted, predominant among them the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)™. In all cases, researchers have attempted to use Likert-type scaling to rate statements that assumedly reflect DMIS stages. In the case of IDI, the statements were drawn from interviews that basically followed the qualitative methodology described above. Raters were able to classify statements into DMIS categories with a high degree of reliability. Exploratory and confirmatory

factor analyses were used to select 50 items representing five and subsequently seven scales. The initial instrument research supported the basic structure of the DMIS and the sequencing of the stages (Hammer, M. Bennett, Wiseman, 2003). Subsequent data analysis supported the discrete stages of *Denial*, *Defense* (with *reversal* as a separate scale), *Minimization*, *Acceptance*, and *Adaptation*. The final stage of *Integration* was not measured in the IDI research.

By assuming that the scale structure and Likert-type rating was yielding interval data, and further assuming that "intercultural sensitivity" was a latent variable, the IDI employed parametric statistics to generate a normative distribution, which in turn allowed combined scale scores to be compared in a similar fashion to measurements of IQ. Additionally, the parametric assumption allowed statistical significance to be attributed to changes in aggregate scores through t-testing, which meant that the IDI could be used for pre/post quantitative program evaluation.

Criticisms of the DMIS and its measurements

The main criticism of the DMIS has been that its assumed linearity of movement represents a "Western" and/or "male" bias, and that intercultural sensitivity might be better described in more nonlinear ways. This is a sub-category of criticisms of developmental models in general, which all treat change as accretionary. Alternative explanations may assume that change is cyclical or rapidly transformational. A deeper criticism of DMIS that is less often stated but nevertheless implied by alternative explanations of intercultural competence is that human behavior should be understood in the positivist terms of objective science rather than in the more probabilistic terms of observer-dependent constructivism. It is certainly the case that most explanations of intercultural competence attribute causality to underlying traits or characteristics, while the DMIS instead assumes that intercultural competence is simply the enactment of intercultural sensitivity – a learned perceptual adaptation.

DMIS qualitative measurements are criticized as being cumbersome and subjective – a valid criticism of all qualitative measures. Like most constructivist theory, DMIS builds upon thick description of human behavior rather than the leaner snapshots afforded by quantitative measures. But the snapshot approaches (including IDI™) are criticized for simplifying the complex phenomenon of intercultural communication. The IDI is also criticized for inferring the existence of a normally distributed "quality" that is being measured by the test, when the basis for the IDI's validity – the DMIS – does not make such an assumption.

Research and theoretical development regarding intercultural sensitivity in general and the DMIS in particular is continuing. Insofar as that research grows from the original constructivist and developmental roots, it will avoid taxonomic classification and focus instead on developmental diagnosis and intervention. Such research will also eschew correlations with personality characteristics and focus instead on perceptual adaptation.

SEE ALSO: Constructivist Approach to Intercultural Communication; Cross-Cultural Communication Theory and Research, Overview; Cross-Cultural Competence; Cultural Communication, Overview; Culture-Specific and Culture-General Training; Dialectics of Culture and Communication; Intercultural Competence Development; Intercultural Empathy; Intercultural Ethics

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