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Constructivist definition of culture; generalizations & stereotypes, cultural identity, levels of cultural analysis, DMIS adaptation strategies

Three principles of intercultural sensitivity

Lecture by Milton Bennett. Transcribed and edited by Patrick Schmidt.

To put you into the context, we need to talk about three major principles of intercultural sensitivity which have developed the last 50 years.

The first idea is subjective culture. The notion of subjective culture is contrasted to the idea of objective culture.

Objective culture is referred often to “CULTURE, written with a big ‘C’. For native speakers, this typically means going to the opera or going to a lecture on history or some other thing. Objective culture refers to the institutions of a group, the products, artifacts that have been created by a group of people. Berger and Luckman in their book on “The social construction of reality”, a classic sociology text, calls this the “institutional level of objective culture”.

Subjective culture, on the other hand, is that kind of culture that we internalize through those institutions into our everyday worldview. It’s not simply everyday behavior, it’s not buying bread in a store. It’s more the way in which we organize our experience in the world. Each of us in different cultures organizes our experiences in some systematically different ways from people of other cultures. Thus, the idea of culture difference in the subjective sense is not differences of art, architecture, food, etc., although there are also differences of objective cultures. It’s how we each differently organize our perception, how we experience the world around us, the way we approach relationships, the way we organize our experience of time, for instance. The kinds of things are part of our subjective worldview. This worldview is what constitutes subjective culture.

This idea is consistent with the original idea of subjective culture coming from American anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead and Frank Boaz, who develop the idea of cultural worldview to counteract the notion of objective culture as being a mark of greater civilization. Not so long ago, we spoke of societies that were more cultured or less cultured. The more cultured societies took it upon themselves to colonize the less cultured societies and bring Culture to the less cultured people. Barbarian and savage societies would be colonized by the more civilized and cultured societies.

This was based on a hierarchical notion of culture, that somehow people who had more of certain kinds of this objective culture were therefore more civilized. This idea of creating a hierarchy was then criticized and heavily counteracted by the American and European anthropologists, who said that “this doesn’t capture the feeling of equal complexity of human beings, that a human being who is a member of a tribal group has every bit as a complex experience of the world as a human being that belongs to

some European society; that there's no difference in the complexity of experience of the world." It is that complexity of experience that we refer to as our subjective worldview. Thus, cultures became equal to one another, you can't speak of one group having more culture than another, as being superior to another. They were simply different from one another.

This idea became, as you can see, an extremely important and central idea to intercultural communications, that is we are not communicating with one another from a position of power, although that may be true in terms of the objective culture or institutions. It may well be one culture continues to have more power than another. In intercultural relations, we are emphasizing the interaction of our subjective worldviews that are equally complex. In that sense, we are equal. It is the coming to that realization, which is the development of intercultural competence.

Another implication of subjective culture is that we are constructing the boundaries of culture. What this means, we cannot argue that there really is or is not a particular culture, we must indeed say, we are in the process of constructing a boundary that generates that culture.

Briefly, to give you a small graphic of what that looks like, if this is the set of all human behavior here, the way in which we draw the boundary and what it does is to generate an inside condition, let's call it A as oppose to the outside condition, let's call it not A. Inside that boundary, we can put anything, frequently we will put a national culture. Okay, we draw the political boundaries of a place, inside that's Germany and outside that is not Germany. Or, we can draw the boundaries a bit broader, say all countries inside are European and outside are not European. Or, we can become more specific and say inside this boundary is an ethnic group, gypsies for instance and outside not gypsies, but who live within a national boundary, such as Romania.

Or yet another way of drawing the boundaries is to say here are two national groups, let's say one of them is Iraq and one of them is Turkey. You have people who consider themselves as Iraqis and here as Turks. However, across these boundaries, you have another group we call Kurdish, an ethnic group. In this case, they cut across the national groups. These people may identify more with their ethnic background than their national heritage. We can think of other boundaries — gender boundaries, social classes, engineers. In all cases, the boundary indicates a greater level of interaction within the boundary than outside the boundary. So, Germans, for instance, interact more with German than they do with, let say, the French people.

Typically, an ethnic group boundary cuts across national groups occur when the national boundary had been constructed, often by the colonial powers and imposed on groups that have other affiliations. The Allied powers imposed national boundaries on groups that have other affiliations, which don't have much to do with people's feeling of what culture they belong to. So, the ethnic boundary becomes more important compared to the national boundary. In the United States, there is a balance of ethnic and national boundaries. They tend to use both terms to refer to themselves. For instance, Afro-Americans might say: Look, I see myself as belonging to the American boundary. I see myself as being inside it. But I also see myself belonging to the boundary of a person of African heritage. In that way, I consider myself as an African-American, someone who belongs to both boundary conditions. This is becoming a very common condition in the world, not just in the USA. This is what we

call a *multi-layered culture identity*. This will become a more important idea as time goes on.

Second principle of intercultural work is interaction analysis. This means, when we are talking about subjective culture, we are not just doing ethnographic description, we are not saying this culture is like that and that culture is like that. We are not even saying that this culture is like this compared to that culture which is like that. All of that is important and interesting, but it tends to be anthropology or comparative education. What is particularly intercultural communication is the analysis of interaction when these cultures come together. This analysis of interactions tend to occur within certain frameworks, such as language use — what words we use in social context, non-verbal behaviour (gesturing or eye contact), communication style (how we organize our messages, if we go straight to the point, low or high context, indirect, do we confront people by saying 'that's a stupid idea'), these are all communication issues.. What do we call people who are direct: rude, impolite, patronizing, know-it-all. Circular people are ambiguous, lying, beating around the bush. We can predict the type of misunderstanding that is likely to occur by understanding there are different communication styles and then analysing a particular interaction between those styles. Much of intercultural communication is based on that kind of interaction analysis.

Finally, we come to the idea of adaptation strategy. The focus is how do we use our knowledge of subjective culture and interaction analysis to move to the ability to behave more effectively and appropriately in other cultural situations. Another way of saying this is to increase our repertoire of behaviour so we are able to behave in a wider range of situations authentically. That is, we don't stop being who we are, but we attain the ability to extend who we are into ways that appropriate in a wider range of cultural situations.

We are particularly interested, this is perhaps the very leading edge of the field, in what happens when people try to adapt to one another. That is, I'm trying to adapt to you, but equally you are trying to adapt to me. That is, in our attempt to come together to adapt, perhaps we generate a 3rd culture. We generate a position that is neither more yours nor more mine, but a third place that adds to the overall creativity or value to our interaction. This is what multi-national teams try to attain – this sort of creative synergy that is generated through the interaction of different value systems. When we say, there's a value in the multi-cultural organization, what we're saying is that some creativity, some synthesis brought about by different cultural perspectives. However, what we are learning, this doesn't happen naturally or automatically, doesn't happen because the cultures are in the same place and at the same time. Rather, it happens because there's a *competent* attempt toward mutual adaptation. That's what generates a third culture, which in turns feeds creativity into the organization.

International relations and political science that deal specifically with the relationship of power and institutional power, who has power over whom, how is that power is exercised etc. are operating on a high level of abstraction, that means they are dealing with macro-level phenomenon. This is rather different from the mid-range of analysis, which is about where the communication occurred. Mid-range abstraction is looking at normative-group behaviour or culture worldview and so-forth. That doesn't mean

that it's not important to do high-level abstraction, but the focus of intercultural work tends to be at the mid-range analysis and not specifically at the exercise of institutional power. That doesn't mean that we, individually, look at that, but the field of intercultural education specializes at the mid-range of abstraction. As a result, it can answer questions about mutual adaptation better than the exercise or abuse of institutional power.

The other possibility here is that we are operating at a low-level of abstraction, which is largely an individual level. This is typically around individual personal characteristics, psycho-dynamics. But communication is more in the mid-range.

All these three levels represent the important strains in the cultural field.

Let's shift our view to how we go about developing this intercultural sensitivity. All right, I've mentioned the idea of sensitivity, which is the ability to perceive things, to organize things in a more complex way, to have a deeper perception of something and this is related to the experience of the thing. Since we are speaking of the sensitivity to cultural difference here, or intercultural sensitivity, we will therefore be speaking about the experience of difference. To what extent am I able to experience difference?

In some ways, this is similar to any kind of expert's model as they call them and let me give you a small example of this. Who knows something about chocolate and who knows very little or zero knowledge of chocolate? In your experience, how many kinds of chocolate are there? One! That brown stuff, it tastes kind of sweet. But now, going to our expert, in your experience, in your taste, how many kinds of chocolate are there. Thousands! You can tell the difference from a Finnish and Belgian chocolate. The first person can make discriminations, has more experience, has a deeper understanding, more depth than the person who has a superficial knowledge. She is, in fact, a more competent judge of chocolate. We say the person has sensitivity, and therefore has more capability of exercising competence around chocolate. It's the same for culture. What we are saying is that within in the context of culture and intercultural communications, people who are able to experience culture difference in a more sophisticated way, that is they are able to make more discriminations in the different forms of culture, have a greater capability of exercising competence in their cross-cultural situations.

Now, this model starts out in the ethnocentric mode and moves to ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism is the feeling of your culture, the experience of your culture, as being more real than other cultures. People who are ethnocentric tend to believe that they have more sense of reality than other cultures. As oppose to the other side, ethnorelative, people see or experience their culture as simply one of many, equally complex cultures in the world.

The ethnocentrism is, of course, the default condition of socialization; that we are socialized not to believe that our culture is one way of being in the world. Nobody tells their children 'eat with your hands' or 'don't eat with your hands' because that's one way of doing things in the world. No, you say 'that's the way to eat'. So kids grow up with the idea of what they're learning is the way reality works. They don't grow up thinking that this is one way reality can be organized. So, this idea that you see your culture relative to other cultures is an idea that develops later in life. It's part of a secondary development and I would say it demands a certain level of cognitive

development, so you won't see it until after you have, by Piaget's terms, abstract abilities, which means in the teen-age years. It's the first time that people can conceive of this idea that their culture can be different from others.

Younger children, of course, can get along well with people from other cultures. It doesn't mean we can't work with them. But we can't really work with this idea of cultural relativity until people can think of themselves in abstract terms. We can't really talk about cultural relativity until people are able to think of themselves in abstract terms and that happens generally after the age of 12, 13 or 14.

What children do is attain a fast second socialization or dual primary socialization and what that means is that they are able to shift between the two cultures rather easily and they consider them both real. But they can't conceptualize the idea that they are making a shift in the organization of reality. So, it means they don't necessarily adapt well to a third culture. But if they can have that abstract ability brought to bear, meaning "heh, this is what I know what to do, I know how to shift from this to this" then, they can use that ability to adapt to a third, fourth or fifth culture.

We all carry a little of ethnocentrism with us. You can catch yourself in some basic form of ethnocentrism. You find that you react to a familiar tragedy more strongly than to an unfamiliar tragedy. So, for instance, some of you who are Islamic, you may have caught yourself when people at the Hajj were trampled to death. This was a terrible tragedy.

However, you may not have felt so strongly about the sinking of the ferry boat where 1500 Egyptian workers drowned. Catch yourself, recognizing the familiar people. We find the familiar more real than the unfamiliar. For instance, the Americans would have more feelings for those who lost their lives in the Katrina storm than, let's say, a equally tragic hurricane in Bangladesh. The reason for that is they would be more likely to find the familiar to be more real than the unfamiliar. Therefore the tragedy appears to be more immediate than the tragedy associated with unfamiliar people. This is an example of minor ethnocentrism and I think all of us carry a certain amount of that

Denial: People are in a state of isolation and separation from cultural difference. Their experience of the world is entire like that. The idea behind denial is that we are not able to perceive anything outside our immediate familiar experience. That's the psychological definition of the inability to perceive. An alcoholic is not able to perceive that he or she is drinking. People, whose predominate orientation is denial, are unable to recognize that other people are having experiences that are different from their own. They may have a vague idea that something is out there, but are unable to clarify it, undistinguished — vague idea of immigrants, people over there — but that fuzzy view is not well developed. Example of the parade with Chinese and Japanese, who were lumped together—a characteristic of denial. Failing to make a distinction between two kinds of people. The director of the parade had an undifferentiated category. You can bring it to the chocolate example — Mr. Brown is in denial about chocolate, he can't make the perceptual distinction that would give reality to the different flavors.

How this works in culture is you have your culture worldview and what your primary culture gives you is a set of constructs and these constructs tell you how to organize

things. Distinguish between three kinds of beer, between high status people and low status people or don't distinguish. All of these constructs are given in your primary socialization that allow you to function in your culture. The question is, do you have an equally sophisticated set of construct to deal with other cultures. It's there that we become different. People in denial have a vague idea of foreigners and lump everyone together.

Another characteristic of denial is to ask stupid questions, the 'stupid question syndrome'. Because they view others in undifferentiated categories, they ask questions based on their vague notion of what the others should be. Example: Here we have the setup for the stupid-question syndrome: American students reach back in their Africa category to ask African students in America if wild animals attacked them. Failing to make distinctions in that category. The question is not meant to be denigration, a put down or anything bad, but reflects this undifferentiated category, failing to make distinctions. People may be very sophisticated in their field, i.e. engineering, medicine, business, but may not be necessarily sophisticated in the cultural field.

Implications for individuals: cognition: inability to perceive or construe from differing cultural contexts; aggressive ignorance: "I don't know, and I don't need to know."

Affect: benign attitude toward others expressed on the surface: tendency to dehumanize others when pressed into cross-cultural contact. Because I can't think of you in this complex way as I think of myself, I may subtly dehumanize you. And if I'm in a position in power, I may exercise that power through exploitation. It's OK for me to pay you less, live in slums, let you live in more dangerous situation because you don't care that much as I do.

Implication for organization may be blind to cultural differences. And suddenly they are faced with a sexism or discrimination suit and people in denial will 'He, where did that come from?'

Behavior: conservative — seeking familiar patterns

Exercise of Power: possibility of exploitation

Defence: In defence, which is related to denial, because the denial blends into the defence. That as one is not able to make discrimination about culture, one tends to stereotype people in other cultures and give them simple forms and the more simple form we'd give to others in other cultures, the more likely we are to getting into negative stereotyping. We then begin to denigrate the others and see the superiority of ourselves. In terms of our worldview, we begin to apply a positive evaluation to our worldview and a negative evaluation to the other worldview. We say "we are the good guys and they are the bad guys. You are either with us or against us." You might hear some political echoes in some of this polarization. And for various reasons, this polarization is of course typical in many political situations, where the assumption is that if you don't organize the world in terms of the good and the bad guys, you may be in a condition of 'reversal'.

And reversal is when we're the bad guys and you're the good guys. I call it the Peace Corp syndrome. When you live in another country for some time, there's a tendency to take on the goodness of the other country and to be more critical on your own society. In terms of defence, I'm still polarizing — it's just I've changed sides. My Americanism has become the bad guy and my Micronesians have become the good guy.

Or reversal can take place when persons of a dominant group take on the cause of a non-dominant or oppressed group. A person discovers that they are 1/1000 American Indian and 99.9 % white Anglo group and say: "My people, the native American people as opposed to those awful, terrible Anglo people, who have been oppressing us." This is an Anglo person saying this, whose entire socialization process took place in the dominant Anglo environment. She attempts to ally herself with the oppressed group by shifting into this reverse polarization and suddenly we're the bad guys and they're the good guys.

People who run foreign service programs are worried that any time people are not saying, 'we're the good guys and you're the bad guys' but have shifted into 'we're the bad guys and they're the good guys', they have gone over to the other side, they've gone native. That's the concern. What it really is saying is that people running foreign services tend to be coming from this defence position in general. They tend to be polarizing the world into 'us and them'.

This idea of defence has implications for the individual, as you can see there's polarization of information into the evaluation of categories. The feeling of this is threat, being under siege, people are coming to get us. Our behavior is a tendency to separate ourselves from dominant and non-dominant groups. What we are trying to do is protect our identity from what we see as the siege of the outsider. If we do have power, we try to exercise it through denial of equal opportunity. So, let me say, our research shows that denial and defence tend to go together.

Minimization: The movement that is a very important one is from defence to minimization. The reason for this is that minimization, what we have found, is the primary orientation. In many organizations, the curve is looks like this, where the predominate orientation to difference is in minimization .

What we mean here with minimization is the tendency to minimize cultural difference. People here have responded to the polarization of cultures and say, "Well, deep down we are basically all the same." It's the discovery of commonality, the discovery of common humanity. This happens in two large ways. One of them is through physical universalism. And in this case, people discover we are all human beings — we all have two arms and two legs for the most part, we all eat and sleep and in these ways, we are physically similar and in this physical similarity we discover that we are human beings. And you can see if you come from a position of thinking of people as being less human than you are, it's an important discovery.

An extension of this physical idea is that we are all human beings in the sense of being describable with a particular system. For instance, we are all human because we have an ego, an id and a super ego — a Freudian description. A shadow self — a Jungian system. Or introversion, or we can be described in the Maslowian system —

security needs, safety needs, social needs. These systems, which are largely psychological systems, when they are used to describe everyone in the world, it's equally applicable in the world, they act as a kind of minimization. The good thing about them is that it humanizes us, it makes us equally human. The bad thing about them is that they mask cultural differences. That is, by saying everyone in the world is an extrovert or introvert, we tend to give more weight to that and less weight to the fact that people are coming from different cultural worldviews and thus it minimizes the cultural differences.

The other way we can create a minimization is through transcendent universalism. The way this works is that we apply a similar principle to everybody in the world. We say, for instance, everyone is a child of God. And here comes the ethnocentric part 'whether they know it or not.' The problem here is not the belief that a person is a child of God or subject to his will or has karma. These are potential religious principles and I can believe everyone is a child of God. However, it becomes ethnocentric when I think that 'everyone else would think that if they only could.' You see the issue. That's the problem: it's not believing that we are children of God; it's believing that 'everyone else would think that if they only could.'

Of course, we can see this in political issues if we go back to the earlier comment, where we may believe deep down, whether they know it or not, everyone is subject to class base, economical forces. Marxism. Deep down, whether you know it or not, everyone wants to be an individual entrepreneur. You all want to live in a free market economy. If we're coming from a minimization position, we might well be motivated, with the assumption that is what you would want to do, if you only could. But somebody is holding you back, such as a dictator, who is keeping from exercising your natural tendency. So, if we could only help you to liberate yourself from the dictator, then you would embrace the subsequent movement toward the free market economy as being the thing you've always wanted to do. You see the logic here. It's not because I'm thinking I'm somewhat superior in any direct way, not in the same in defence way. It's that I think we are all basically the same. However, we are all basically the same like me. We hardly hear in the world, everybody is the same and they are all like him. It's deep down, we are all the same, and what do you know, it turns out to be me! That's minimization.

The implications for minimization are we are not evaluative of others, but we are operating within familiar categories of our own worldview. So, we see ourselves as being the model for the world basically. Not because we think we are better, but because we think everybody is basically the same, like us. We tend to be insistently nice in one's own cultural terms. We support universal systems: psychological templates, or religious, moral or political principles -- human rights. It's ethnocentric to think about human rights as you do. We should accept human rights from others, but in a more ethnorelative way.

The exercise of power tends to be the unconscious acceptance of privilege, particularly if you find yourself in the dominant group, power position. This is like my particular situation in the USA, where like myself, white European male, we control the institutions of power. Insofar we are in position of power, we don't understand why there aren't more women. And asked why this is so, we will say 'well, they don't work as hard as I do -- Because we have equal opportunities.' If someone says, you are

privileged because you make up the rules. You say, 'no, everybody has equal opportunities – people are basically the same, business is business, the rules are the same and they favour me. These rules are neutral.' This is the inability of seeing oneself as having a cultural advantage.

The organizational implication of this is an overestimation of sensitivity. They think they are a lot more tolerant than they are. The way we get along is stressing our similarity that we have; not by addressing our differences, but finding a similarity. So, it's kind of assimilation. People who are different tend not to stay around in situations like that. And it also leads to a lot of cultural imperialism, even when it was not intended.

Acceptance: It's the movement of accepting and recognizing cultural differences. It's the respect for behavioural and value differences. The implication of acceptance is that we are accepting the viability or equal organization of different cultures. By equal organization, I don't mean they are the same, but organized in equally complex ways. In so doing, we recognize that we are equally sophisticated in different ways. In this way, I now accept the existence of difference. This does not mean I agree with everything. Implications for individuals is that information is organized into specific cultural context. I'm operating in a context here. We tend to be curious about cultural differences, seek information about other cultures. We tend to be paralyzed from exercising power. That they found discovery about cultural difference tends to create a multiplicity of behavior – 'Well, there's that way of doing it or that way.'

This moves us to the next stage of **adaptation**. It's the key to exercising intercultural competence. It's the point of which we are able to take the perspective of another group, I call it cognitive brain shifting and to engage in behavioural code shifting. The difference between the two is that cognitive frame shifting is my ability to take your perspective, not to put myself in your position, but to take your perspective. This is a rather different thing. Say I want to find out how Robert is feeling about this talk. A typical way I might do is put myself into his position. Walk a mile in the other man's position. I could imaginatively put myself into his chair and I look back and say. Am I finding out how Robert feels. Maybe. Now, in what position would that work pretty well? If he's similar to me, from the same culture, same group. But the more different he is, the more he's from another culture, the less likely it is going to work for me to put myself in his position. I'm finding about me, not about him. The more cultural different we are, the more important it is for me to make the cognitive frame shift, so that I'm not looking from Robert's position, but from his perspective. What do I need to know to view from Robert's perspective. I need to know something about Robert, about his culture, how is Robert organizing the world. That's what I need to know to be able to say, 'how is he feeling about this talk so far'.

The psychologists and multi-cultural counsellors call this empathy, to be able to take the perspective. This is central to this stage of development, basically well developed in the therapy world, but not outside it. Once I'm able to take his perspective, then I can behave in ways that may be more transparent, that is it doesn't call attention to itself. And effective — I'm able to do things with Robert, where he gives me credibility to my behavior and says he's acting in a fine way and I'm able to behave in

appropriate ways and so on. Now that doesn't happen naturally. I have to have that behavior as part of my repertoire of behaviors.

So, for instance, if you go to Japan. There are two things you need to do. One of them is you need to look at the world in a more Japanese way. How are you going to do that? Well, you need to know something about Japan. You need to have spent some time talking with Japanese people, organize the world in a more Japanese way, etc. Now, you would like to behave in a more appropriate way in Japan. Does that just happen naturally? Well no, you have to have it as part of your repertoire, the ability to close down your non-verbal behavior, to maintain silence for a long time, be comfortable with silence. But that's a necessary part of your repertoire if you are going to behave appropriately in Japan.

So, how do you know when to be silent? That comes from having a feeling of the situation, from organizing the world in a Japanese way and when you do that, you can feel when to be silent or to be talkative. You have to know as part of your repertoire of behavior what it's like to be silent. That how it works. That doesn't mean you become Japanese. But, our behavior becomes more transparent, more appropriate in the other culture as a result of knowing how to do this.

Note however, you can't do this until you accept that there are cultural differences. You can't accept cultural differences until you see the common humanity of people. You can't see the common humanity of people until you have differentiated them through difference and that means you have to have gotten out of denial. So, in another words, you can't just start here. This is the whole developmental idea.

You are more conscious of frame-shifting, more mindful regarding cultural issues. You intentionally shift codes. That is to say, I'm going to look at the world in a more Finnish way or Japanese way. Exercise of power becomes more appropriate in its cultural context. Organizations say, we need to have more competence in our organizations. Generally, there's more attention.

The last stage is integration. People may define difference as part of their identity. There are two parts – encapsulated or constructive. Typically, this condition begins with people who are bi-cultural; they can shift easily from one culture to another. A lot of people can operate in this way. However, some cultures may clash with another. That is when you are around people from culture A, they say you are a B. And vice-versa. We call it internal culture shock. It may force your identity to the margins. That is you find yourself between cultures, neither A nor B. Two conditions here. One is you may feel stuck between cultures, alienated – you are encapsulated. A lot of self-absorption. Difficulty to make decision. You ask others 'who am I?'

On the other hand, you have a constructive marginality, which is the ability to move in and out of cultures fairly easily, a sort of bridge person. In a sense, you are able to construct an identity. The implications here, you are the generator of knowledge through the construction of context. There's the possibility of identity confusion, but otherwise you are feeling fairly authentic about this position of being a bridge builder. They have a lot of potential for working in intercultural situations. This is a pretty good position to be in.