

Stages in the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

Adapted from materials by Milton J. Bennett

I. Denial of Difference

- Inability to construe cultural differences
- Lack of interaction with people different from oneself
- Simplified sense of how culture impacts their own and other people's lives
- Occurs in two forms – either isolation or intentional separation from other cultures

At this stage, people say:

- “Live and let live – that’s what I say.”
- “All cities are the same – lots of buildings, too many cars, crowds.”
- “As long as we speak the same language, there’s no problem.”
- “I never experience culture shock.”

II. Defense Against Difference

- Recognize differences, but this is coupled with negative evaluation of other cultures
- Prone to dualistic thinking
- Tendency to defend one's own identity and sense of privilege
- Occurs in three forms – denigration of other cultures, superiority of one's own culture, and superiority of another culture to one's own culture (reversal)

At this stage, people say:

- “These people don't value life the way we do.”
- “What a sexist society!”
- “When you go to other countries, it makes you realize how good we have it.”
- “These people are so genuine, not like the superficial people back home.”

III. Minimization of Difference

- Recognize superficial differences, but hold that human beings are essentially the same
- Support universal religious, moral, and political principles
- Tendency to be insistently nice when interacting across cultures
- Occurs in two forms – either from physical universalism based on worldly needs or transcendent universalism based on beliefs and ideas

At this stage, people say:

- “After all, we're all human”
- “We are all children of God, whether we know it or not.”
- “No matter where people are from, they are all motivated by the same things.”
- “Technology is bringing cultural uniformity to the world.”

IV. Acceptance of Difference

- Recognize and appreciate differences in behaviors and values
- Interpret phenomena within a cultural context and build more elaborate categories
- Tendency to be curious about differences
- Occurs in two forms – behavioral relativism and value relativism

At this stage, people say:

- “The more difference the better.”
- “I always try to study about a new culture before I go there.”
- “I want to be respectful of the different values that I will encounter there.”
- “I know my host family and I will be learning together.”

V. Adaptation to Difference

- Consciously link cultural knowledge and skills to create effective intercultural interactions
- Tendency to understand and empathize with different perspectives
- Viewed as culturally competent by people from other cultures
- Occurs in two forms – shifting cognitive frames of reference and shifting behavior

At this stage, people say:

- “To solve this problem, I am going to have to change my approach.”
- I greet people from here and from home differently because of the different ways respect is communicated.”
- The more I understand this culture, the better I get at the language.”
- I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways.”

VI. Integration of Difference

- Internalize multicultural frames of reference
- Maintain a personal identity that is marginal to any particular culture and identify with a peer group of other marginalized individuals
- Tendency to act in culturally appropriate ways but see oneself as “in process”
- Occurs in two forms – encapsulated marginality and constructive marginality

At this stage, people say:

- “Everywhere is home if you know enough about how things work there.”
- “I usually look at situations from a variety of points of view.”
- “I truly enjoy participating fully in both of my cultures.”
- “I find it hard that so many people are unwilling to consider what other cultures offer.”