

Towards ethnorelativism – milton j bennett essay sample

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Organized into six “ stages” of increasing sensitivity to difference, the article identifies the underlying cognitive orientations individuals use to understand cultural difference. Each position along the continuum represents increasingly complex perceptual organizations of cultural difference, which in turn allow increasingly sophisticated experiences of other cultures. By identifying the underlying experience of cultural difference, predictions about behavior and attitudes can be made and education can be tailored to facilitate development along the continuum. Summary of the article:

Ethnocentrism is, according to Bennett, “ the assumption that one’s own culture is central to all reality”. To move “ away” from this, he suggests three “ Ethnocentric pitfalls” to overcome (Denial, Defence, and Minimisation) and then three “ Ethnorelative approaches” (Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration) to achieve this: “ Ethnocentric pitfalls”

I. Denial

A denial of difference is the purest form of ethnocentrism. Even in the face of seemingly obvious differences in human behaviour associated with world affairs or domestic multicultural issues, a person at this stage of development believes that cultural diversity only occurs elsewhere. While this form of ethnocentrism might seem rare in an intercommunicating world, the appearance of this position can be maintained through isolation or separation caused by intentional physical and social barriers.

Isolation

Physical isolation can foster the denial of the existence of difference. From a position of relatively pure isolation, cultural differences are not experienced

at all (they have no meaning). Condition of “ no categories of cultural difference”. Example given of a foreign student placed in an American school and expected to be “ nice” by American standards. People also maintain “ wide categories for cultural difference”, like noticing the difference between Asians and Westerners, but less likely to notice differences between Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese etc. Separation

Separation here is intentional physical or social barriers from cultural difference put in place as a means of maintaining a state of denial (like Apartheid). “ More separation from foreign influence seems to eventuate in greater isolation, which breeds more separation”. Developmental Strategies

At the denial stage of sensitivity, the best technique for development is “ cultural awareness” activities (like an International night, Multicultural weeks, or similar functions). This creates more differentiation. Things like this, as well as political discussions or lectures, serve as a way of simple recognition of difference. The strategy here is to avoid discussion of really significant cultural differences, which could in turn be used to maintain the denial. II. Defence

Refers to a “ posture intended to counter the impact of specific differences perceived as threatening”. Defence battle against difference progresses through three forms: Denigrations, Superiority, and reversal. Denigration

Most common strategy to counter the threat of difference is to evaluate it negatively (negative stereotyping). Easy to recognise in individuals and, occasionally, entire groups. As predicted by the model, defence should be

expected in people who have just come out of denial. A more tenacious form of denigration combines negative stereotyping of different groups with a rationale for their inherent inferiority (Nazis, Ku Klux Klan). Movement beyond denigration can be impeded both by the institutionalisation of hatred and by the tendency to retreat to denial. Superiority

This form of defence emphasises the positive evaluation of one's own cultural status, not necessarily the overt denigration of other groups (feminists and some manifestations of nationalism might be considered examples). Cultural difference perceived as threatening is countered at this stage by implicitly relegating it to a lower-status position. Superiority represents a developmental step beyond denigration because difference is less negatively evaluated, even though it is still something to be overcome. People who have been oppressed might spend more time in the superiority form of defence. Development beyond superiority is facilitated by allowing, but not overemphasising, the benefits of cultural pride. The final stage of ethnocentrism, minimisation, must be passed before a strong emphasis on cultural differences will be effective with this group. Reversal

Reversal involves a denigration of one's own culture and an attendant assumption of the superiority of a different culture (hippie "new agers", who seemingly embrace the superiority of Eastern over Western cultural values). May appear a more interculturally enlightened position than other defence stages. Reversal form may appear most sensitive but it is actually only changing the centre of ethnocentrism. The development implications of this is that if such positive attributes are accompanied by denigration of one's

own culture, it is likely that more development through ethnocentric stages is necessary before work on ethnorelativism can be undertaken.

Developmental Strategies

Developmental movement out of defence is facilitated by emphasising the commonality of cultures, particularly in terms of what is good in all cultures. Failure to allow the next stage, minimisation, by skipping ahead, may result in strengthening the defence stage and rejection of further development. III.

Minimisation

Burying differences under the weight of cultural similarities. Represents a development beyond defence because, at this stage, cultural difference is overtly acknowledged and is not negatively evaluated. Physical Universalism

Human beings in all cultures have physical characteristics in common which dictate behaviour which is understandable to any other human being. With the further assumptions that all cultures are merely elaborations of fundamental biology, cultural difference is relegated to the “relatively unimportant position of permutation”. While some assertions in general may be accurate, for intercultural communication they are trivial. They fail to address the culturally unique social context of physical behaviour.

Transcendent Universalism

Suggests that all human beings are products of some single transcendent principle, law, or imperative (example is any religion). Among all ethnocentric stages, allows for greatest development of cultural difference. People at this stage may find differences interesting and worth learning

about. The major impediment to develop beyond this stage is the belief that one can get by with minimisation behaviour in many intellectual situations.

Developmental Strategies

Next stage after this is Acceptance. For people in minimisation, lack of awareness of their own culture underlies the assumption of cultural similarity. When you place your own behaviour in a cultural context, you are less inclined to think that the behaviour is universal. Effective at this stage to use members from other cultures as resource people (provide credibility for concept of cultural difference that would otherwise elude trainer). The

Ethnorelative Stages

Ethnorelativism assumes that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behaviour can only be understood within a cultural context. Cultural difference is neither good, nor bad – it is just different. Stages of ethnorelativism begin with the “ acceptance of cultural difference as inevitable and enjoyable, through adaptation to cultural differences with intercultural communication skills, to the final stage of integration in which ethnorelativism may be synthesised into a workable new identity”.

VI. Acceptance

In this stage, cultural difference is both acknowledged and respected.

Existence of the difference is accepted as a necessary and preferable human condition. Two stages common in the development of this stage: Respect for Behavioural Difference and Respect for Value Differences. Respect for

Behavioural Difference

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First of the ideas is to accept that verbal and nonverbal behaviour varies across cultures and that all forms of such behaviour are worthy of respect (if not personal support) Respect for Value Differences

At this stage of development, there is acceptance of the different worldview assumptions that underlie cultural variation in behaviour. Developmental Strategies

Movement to the next stage of intercultural sensitivity, “Adaptation”, is encouraged by emphasising the practical application of acceptance. Example given is off a training program discussion of American/ European value differences, accompanied with immediate applications to improving relations with prospective homestay families. V. Adaptation

At this stage, “adaptation”, skills for relating to and communicating with people of other cultures are enhanced. Is meant to exclude connotations of “assimilation”. New skills appropriate to a different worldview are acquired in an additive process. The maintenance of your own worldview is encouraged, so the adaptations necessary for effective communication in other cultures extend, rather than replace, one’s native skills. Empathy

Central to any intercultural communication skill is the ability to experience some aspect of reality differently than one’s own culture. Anything less than this shift in experience risks ethnocentrism.

Pluralism

Pluralism here is used to indicate two aspects of the adaptation stage of intercultural sensitivity. One is a philosophical commitment to the existence

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of a “multitude of irreducible and equivalent ultimate wholes, ideas, values and value scales, as well as experiences in which they are tested”. Cultures are not only different, but that such difference must always be understood totally within the context of the relevant culture. Developmental Strategies

Participants moving out of acceptance are eager to apply their knowledge of cultural difference to actual face-to-face communication. Now is the time to provide opportunities for this. Might include multicultural group discussions, or outside assignments involving interviewing of people from other cultures.

VI Integration

Integration stage describes the attempt to integrate disparate aspects of one's identity into a new whole while remaining culturally marginal. Two forms of Integration are Contextual Evaluation and Constructive Marginality.

Contextual Evaluation

This is a development beyond adaptation where one attains the ability to analyze and evaluate situations from one of more chosen cultural perspectives. Example given, is it good to refer directly to a mistake made by someone else? In most American contexts, it is good. In most Japanese context, it is bad. However it might be good in some cases to use an American style in Japan, and vice versa. The ethical consideration is part of integration. Constructive Marginality

When marginality is preceded by other stages of ethnorelative development (or when those stages are added to marginality), the elements of adaptation

and choice come into play. These two skills allow a marginal person to construct appropriate frames of reference for particular purposes.

Conclusion

For people looking to use this model, there are a number of assumptions: *

Firstly, “ the phenomenology of difference is the key to intercultural

sensitivity. * Second assumption is that the construing of difference

necessary for intercultural sensitivity is that if ethnorelativism (whereby different cultures are perceived as variable and viable constructions of

reality) * Third is that ethical choices can and must be made for intercultural sensitivity to develop. * Final consideration is that of the appropriate level of intercultural sensitivity of a trainer or educator.