Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

…for AFS & Friends

T he Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Milton J. Bennett as a framework to explain the reactions of people as they engage with cultural differences. Bennett observed that individuals deal with cultural differences in certain predictable ways, which can be divided into six developmental stages. Each of these stages builds on the previous ones.

DENIAL
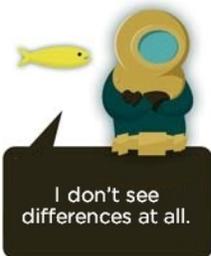
Individuals who are in the Denial stage are not aware of culture differences. They know how things are done in their own culture and assume that in other places and/or groups it is more or less the same. Since individuals in this stage assume that cultural differences do not exist, they generally are disinterested in the topic of culture.

Typical quotes of individuals in the Denial stage are:

"All big cities are the same – a lot of buildings, too many cars, and Starbucks."

"I have never had much contact with other cultures and the topic does not interest me."

I don't see differences at all.

DEFENSE

In the stage of Defense, individuals become aware of cultural differences and they are often threatened or intimidated by them. For those in the Defense stage, the world is divided into "us" and "them". There are two forms of Defense: one form is where individuals see "us" as being better than "them" and the other form, called reversal, is where individuals admire the other culture and see their own culture as inferior.

Typical quotes of individuals in the Defense stage are:

"When you go to another country, you realize how good your own country is."

"My compatriots make me embarrassed, so I spend all of my time with natives of my host country." (reversal)

I see our differences, but I don't like them and my culture is better. I love me.

I see our differences, I like them and your cultureis better. I love you.

MINIMIZATION

In Minimization, individuals believe that, since we are all humans, everyone is fundamentally the same. To individuals in the Minimization stage, cultural differences are trivial - what matters most is that we are all human beings and therefore we have similar feelings, hopes, and needs. Individuals act according to the rule: treat others as you would like to be treated.

Typical quotes of individuals in the minimization stage are:

"The key to getting along with people from other cultures is being authentic and honest."

"The customs are different, but when you really get to know the people you realize that they are basically the same as we are."

Yeah, let's forget about the differences I can see. I love us.

ACCEPTANCE

Individuals who enter the Acceptance stage are able to recognize that there are significant differences between individuals from distinct cultures and one both accepts and respects these differences. However, in this stage, individuals still feel insecure about how to deal with these differences.

Typical quotes of individuals in the Acceptance stage are:

"Sometimes I get confused, knowing that values are different in other cultures and wanting to be respectful, but also wanting to maintain my personal values."

"I know that my host family and I have had very different life experiences, but we are learning how to live together."

I see and respect differences and similarities.

ADAPTATION

I see, respect, understand and incorporate the differences.

In the Adaptation stage, individuals have gained the competency and experience to effectively deal with the culture differences. They are able to adapt their ways of interacting and communicating, and also to the values that exist in other cultures. They are completely comfortable interacting with people who have different values and beliefs. Culture is now seen as a process of engagement with others, rather than something that one has. In this stage, individuals have developed cultural empathy and act according to the rule: treat others as they wish to be treated.

Typical quotes of individuals in the Adaptation stage are:

"Whatever the situation might be, I can normally look at it from a variety of cultural points of view."

"I greet people from my culture and people from my host culture in different ways, taking into account how different cultures show respect."

INTEGRATION

The Integration stage is related to one's cultural identity. In Integration, the individual has developed a sense of him or herself as a member of two or more cultural groups. The individual is comfortable with cultural relativity and is able to evaluate the appropriate response depending on the context.

Typical quotes of individuals in the Integration stage are:

"Whatever the situation, I can usually look at it from a variety of cultural points of view, and I feel comfortable doing this."

"I like to participate 100% in my two cultures."

I am able to fully integrate into two different cultures.

THE DMIS . . .

. . . can also provide structure for how to support individuals in the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence. Milton J. Bennett, together with Janet M. Bennett, identified key developmental tasks that individuals in each stage must confront and overcome before being able to advance to the next stage:

- In the **Denial** stage, individuals must learn to recognize the existence of cultural differences.

- In the **Defense** stage, people can diminish their polarized perspectives by emphasizing "common humanity" and similarities in needs and feelings.
- In the **Minimization** stage, a person needs to develop cultural self-awareness and learn that even if there are similarities between cultures, there are also a lot of differences.
- In the **Acceptance** stage, individuals must refine their analysis of cultural contrasts, making cultural differences the focus and practicing cultural frame-of-reference shifting.
- In the **Adaptation** stage, one must perfect one's cultural frame-of-reference skills and increase one's ability to empathize with others.

The DMIS can help us to better understand our learners' needs and to design activities for them so that they can develop the intercultural competence that will allow them to interact successfully in our multicultural world.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)…

- ✓ is a framework that describes people's reactions as they engage with cultural differences.
- ✓ has six stages: Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration.
- ✓ can help us to better understand and support the development of intercultural sensitivity.

For more theoretical & practical information:

Janet & Milton Bennett (1998): *Developing Intercultural Competence: A Reader*