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HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY?

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What is the difference between cultural and intercultural competency?

Cultural competency means you know your own group and you are a good connector within your own group. You can know lots about your own culture and be very good with interpersonal skills in your cultural setting and still not be inter-culturally competent. You are *culturally competent* when you are aware of and know how to use the cultural information about your own group that others may not be aware of. Culturally competent people are good *bonders*.

Inter-cultural competency means you can stand on the edge between your own group and someone else's group and become a bridge to connect between the groups. To develop intercultural competence you need to practice understanding and working with people who are culturally different from you. Interculturally competent people are good *bridgers*.

What does it take to become interculturally competent?

You *do not* need to be gregarious and friendly, enjoy being with other people who are not like you, want to hang out in groups, be extroverted, like new experiences and foods, learn another language, or be comfortable with newness to become inter-culturally competent. You *do* need to be open, interested, curious, care about people and social inequities, see the world as a place to learn from, can accept being uncomfortable, and be willing to ask questions and suspend judgment to become inter-culturally competent. If you are convinced you are right and others are wrong, if you find yourself saying "those people", if you have a list of things you don't like about various groups but can't think of anything you do like, and if you are not willing to be uncomfortable at any point in your relationships with others, you cannot gain intercultural competency.

Intercultural competency does not mean you never make an evaluation or a judgment. It just means you wait longer and consider more options until you do. It means you can see the person in the culture and the culture in the person. You can see how cultural norms have both helped and harmed the development of human potential. Inter-culturally competent individuals are not naïve about culture. They do not cheer for multiculturalism as if there were no problems involved in people living and working and playing together. But they see the project of learning to live together as being so important they want to learn how to do it.

No one can know all cultures, we can't even know our own. But we can learn to pay closer attention and ask better questions to know people on their own terms instead of our ideas of who they should be. Because it is an ongoing project, no one can become truly inter-culturally competent and say they have nothing left to learn. Intercultural competency is a process that goes on as long as there is life and people to interact with.

What is the difference between a cultural norm and a stereotype?

Stereotypes are *proactive* in that they assume that people will all act a certain way or have certain motivations if they belong to a given cultural group. Stereotypes assume people to be something they are not. The reason stereotypes stay alive, however, is because there is a grain of truth to them. Some cultural norm has given birth to a stereotype and this keeps the stereotype intact.

Cultural norms are *reactive* in that they do not assume a person will act within a limited set of cultural behaviors. However if a person does act within a given norm, one can attribute it to a cultural tendency based on general knowledge of cultural behaviors within given groups. A cultural norm can only be assumed if it is first observed, and even then within the understanding that individuals vary greatly in their adherence to cultural norms. A stereotype assumes that individuals are limited to cultural behaviors, a cultural norm describes generalized behaviors that may or may not apply in varying degrees dependent upon the context. For example, it is a cultural norm for East Indians to eat spicy food. However not all Indian food is equally spicy and individuals may have varying degrees of preference for spicy food within East Indian populations.

How do I know if a behavior is cultural or not?

Cultural norms are group behaviors and so any group behavior that becomes the norm, is cultural. There are international, national, regional, geographical, political, religious, ethnic, linguistic, gender, age, professional, city or town, urban/rural or interest-based cultural groups with their own cultural norms. Cultural norms can be healthy or unhealthy. It may be "normal" for people to drink themselves under the table after work in Japan, but it may not be healthy. Women may be "normally" denied education and opportunities to be active members of a given society but it may not be healthy either for the women or for the economy of that country to keep this norm active. Some cultural norms are simply preferences or behaviors that are innocuous. It doesn't affect people negatively or positively to celebrate the New Year in January or March or to either take a bath in orange peels or have a night out with the family before the wedding night. If your culture dances with bells and bare feet or red boots and swords, there is nothing good or bad that will come out of either type of dance. What becomes problematic is when individuals use culture as a screen for behaviors that hurt them, others or the environment. Culture cannot be used as an excuse for harmful behavior, neither should harmful behavior or intent be implicated in other people's cultural behaviors simply because they are not common in my culture.

Does culture change? And how do we belong?

Culture is dynamic and changing. One only has to leave home for a few months to notice that upon returning home has changed and the person who left changed too. The reason culture

changes, is because life changes and circumstances change. Norms that may have been applicable in the past may no longer work and so they either gradually change or they are forced to change rapidly because the conditions that held them in place no longer exist.

One thing that does stay the same in culture is that people need to belong and people need to be unique. To belong we have to modify our behavior and tendencies to be a part of the group. To be recognized as the unique individuals we are, we have to stand apart from the group and remove ourselves from belonging. Interestingly, those very things that make us unique also qualify us to belong to certain groups and it is our belonging to various groups that makes us unique.

I may be unique because I am an older woman in business or because I am a visible minority married to someone outside my race and ethnic group. But those characteristics also allow me to belong to groups of people who are like me and our belonging to those groups reinforces both our uniqueness and our qualifications to belong to other groups. An older woman in business automatically belongs to several groups: women, business owners and older people. She may also belong to a women in business group or an older business owner group. She may belong to other groups if she has family, children or is married, divorced or single, if she plays hockey or violin or if she likes to write poetry or travel. All those qualities make her the unique person she is but also connect her to others that allow her to belong to those many groups of people. It is a very important paradox in intercultural competency to realize that the more people are recognized as the unique people they are, they more likely they are to feel they belong. If we have nothing in common and are so completely different, there is no point in trying to get together, and if there is nothing unique about us, what would be the attraction or the interest? This is why we need both uniqueness and belonging to work in tension with each other to really grow.

In group and out group behavior as key to understanding where to begin

Every cultural group has a sense of who is “in” the group and who is “out”. There is some evidence that children as young as two years of age can perceive and respond appropriately to in and out group cultural clues. Watching a given group’s in-group behavior can give you clues to how they see each other and how they see you. A given cultural group could have any or combinations of the following cultural worldviews with regard to in-group/out-group relationships and dynamics:

Table 1

Adapted from: Piontkowski, Ursula; Florack, Arnd; Hoelker, Paul; Obdrzalek, Peter. (2000)

In group	Out group	Usual attitude
Strong in-group identification	Weak out-group identification	Support of in group members, suspicion of outsiders Little or no contact with outside groups, prejudice
Strong in-group identification	Strong out-group identification	Support of in group members, support of outsiders Integration
Weak in-group identification	Strong out-group identification	Lack of cultural attachment, tends to identify with difference rather than similarity, could be culturally self-depreciative Assimilation or Integration
Weak in-group identification	Weak out-group identification	Poor self and group image, feels alienated from society Alienation or Marginalization

Of the four possibilities in the above table, the least healthy is the last one. People who exhibit weak in and out group identification tend to turn to crime, gangs, addictions and suicide because they do not feel they belong anywhere and are likely to try to get back at the groups they perceive of as having the power to reject them.

The category that can result in either assimilation or integration is the group with weak in-group identification and strong out-group identification. People in this group who are negative about their own culture tend to assimilate into the dominant culture, or if they are in the dominant culture, to increase their association with minority groups even to the exclusion of association with the in-group. Those who are simply ambivalent about their own culture are able to learn from and adopt aspects of various groups that are appealing to them but their lack of primary cultural attachment makes them feel rootless and always on the outside. People with this cultural world view sometimes describe themselves as third-culture, “half” or global citizens.

The category with strong in and out group identification is the healthiest since they can welcome newcomers without feeling threatened and find ways to appreciate and incorporate aspects of various cultures that they are attracted to, while maintaining a strong sense of in-group cultural belonging. A wonderful description of this is cultural worldview is Mahatma Gandhi’s famous statement that he wanted the windows of his home open to all cultural influences but he did not want to be blown away by any of them.

The top category describes individuals who feel their group is the best and that others are either wrong, bad or misguided. In this cultural world view, the in-group does not allow other groups to actually join them, even though they say others need to assimilate in order to belong. There is no access to the in-group in the top category; outsiders cannot do anything to belong, and they will not be accepted by the in-group even if they try to make themselves look and act the same.

Dominant and minority culture characteristics

Culture is not neutral. Everyone has culture by virtue of belonging to any group and all groups have norms of behavior that are acceptable or not. Dominant cultures may perceive themselves to be neutral or culture-less but this attitude is an indication of perceiving one's group as keeper of the social norms. Being "without culture" gives the dominant group permission to name reality and relegate culture to the "other" as if it were optional or deficient. Until the dominant group sees its reality as cultural, it has difficulty knowing, learning from or learning with minority groups. Until minority groups see themselves as having reality, they have no negotiating power with the dominant group with regard to cultural norms or may use culture as a screen for harmful behaviors.

Conclusions

In summary, intercultural competency can be distinguished from cultural competency in that the former requires bridging across difference where the latter is a question of bonding within the group. Cultural norms are the standard behaviors within a given group that will have variance depending upon the individuals and their circumstances. All groups develop normed behaviors and this is called cultural because it varies from group to group. Cultural behavior is different from social behavior or human behavior but is related to both. It could be said that cultural behavior is a type of human social behavior. Cultural norms can be healthy or unhealthy or innocuous, but they are not neutral and people have strong feelings about them.

Although culture is dynamic, changing and hard to pin down, there is one constant: we all want to be recognized for the unique people we are and to belong to groups. This is the paradox of culture because to belong you have to conform to the group norms and to be unique you have to step outside of group norms. The other paradox is that the more we are unique, the more groups we can potentially be a part of, and the more we belong to various groups, the more we are unique.

The healthiest cultural groups encourage individuals to be themselves, to blossom and to grow while allowing them to belong. However there is always a limit to the range of behavior that cannot be accepted if one wants to continue to belong to the group. For example people who believe in negotiating a peaceful agreement for the best possible solution for all and people who believe in fighting to stake territory cannot belong to each others' groups; one attitude is the antithesis of the other, they cannot co-exist.

Cultural norms are reactive in that one does not expect people to act within a cultural norm until they actually do. Stereotypes are proactive in that they box people into a cultural behavior whether or not it applies.

Two other themes in understanding cultural behaviors, adapting one's own behavior in response and thus gaining in intercultural competence are:

- a) in and out group clues
- b) dominant and minority attitudes with regard to what is "reality" and what is "culture".

Cultural groups have various responses to each other depending on the strength of their attachment to their own group and their identification with the in-group, out-groups or both. Watching for clues in behaviors, words and body language can help understand which of these cultural tendencies are predominant allowing a more complete assessment of the situation and increasing the likelihood of a positive experience. It is important to watch for these dynamics to make sure we are not confusing culture with personality or wellness issues.

Intercultural competency is the development of awareness of self and others in culture and willingness to learn together. But it will not solve all problems between people. Human behaviors always involve a judgment as to whether a given behavior is more or less good or bad for self, others and the environment. People need to reflect upon better and worse ways of living and view both short and long term consequences of their behaviors as both individuals and members of cultural groups. When this happens, cultures are able to move forward in healthier ways. Cultural knowledge and intercultural competency are parts of the human relations puzzle, the other part being moral competency. The inter-relationship between cultural and moral behavior is touched upon in Table 2, but requires more development.

To conclude, culture is complex and dynamic and we can never fully understand it although we can make things easier for all of us to live and work together through continuous learning. As we grow in intercultural competency we change our response to individuals and groups outside of our own cultural backgrounds, and this in turn affects the development of other groups. To help understand this process more practically, consider the following table as a way to begin developing intercultural knowledge, skill and values bearing in mind that the table's linear quality is deceptive. The headings make it look as if one begins with awareness, practices a bit and then reaches a level of competency where one stays. It is true that one's repertoire increases, but the process of developing intercultural competency is more circular than can be shown in table format; as has been already stated many times, with real learning, the beginning is in the ending and the ending is in the beginning.

Table 2: Intercultural knowing, doing and being GERVAIS, 2009.

Knowing/head Content, comprehension, imagination	Doing/hands Skills, abilities, attributes, behaviors, actions	Being/heart Attitudes, values, wisdom, qualities
AWARENESS LEVEL	AWARENESS LEVEL	AWARENESS LEVEL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees self culturally. • Recognizes culture in others. • Aware of similarities and differences between cultures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to hear and consider several points of view. • Looks for cultural clues to understand better. • Listens actively. • Begins to initiate conversation, interactions with individuals from other cultures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to learning. • Curious. • Willing to spend time in situations where difference of culture may feel uncomfortable. • Desires to know others on their own terms.
PRACTICE LEVEL	PRACTICE LEVEL	PRACTICE LEVEL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to recognize behaviors in self and others within degrees of cultural attachment. • Can identify stereotypes versus cultural generalizations. • Understands significance of power in intercultural and interpersonal relationships. • Is increasingly aware of the role of colonization and white privilege in relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks questions to understand others while demonstrating sensitivity to response and context. • Actively seeks to understand others at a deeper level. • Considers pros and cons of specific cultural behaviors. • Begins to see how privilege and cultural knowledge can be used in the service of others and makes efforts to do so. • Strives to avoid others' loss of face. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes personal discomfort with cultural difference and does not dismiss either the discomfort or the difference. • Maintains engagement with others even when it is difficult. • Tolerance of cultural practices. • Increased empathy. • Increased sense of justice. • Kindness. • Does not want to see others lose face, sensitivity.
INTERNALIZATION LEVEL	INTERNALIZATION LEVEL	INTERNALIZATION LEVEL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can separate culture from personality, race, social class, wellness. • Understands the links between culture, personality, race, social class, wellness. • Ability to articulate cultural specifics without being judgmental. • Ability to separate and link cultural generalities and cultural specifics. • Increasingly nuanced understanding of kinds and degrees of culture: ethnic, geographical, regional, national, religious, gender, professional and other cultural influences. • Seeks out and increasingly understands the role of history and context in culture. • Can name and speak to geography as part of cultural makeup. • Recognizes personal cultural attachments and their role in intercultural relationship building. • Shows realism and insights into solving problems through cultural strengths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridges between cultures and actively promotes understanding between different groups and between individuals from different groups. • Skilled in situational analysis. • Skilled in situational synthesis. • Mixes regularly with people from a variety of cultures. • Sees capacity in individuals irrespective of their race, religion or culture. • Can adjust personal cultural behaviors to match or simulate others' cultural behaviors. • Uses nuanced understanding of culture to scaffold learning, interpersonal relationships and promotions of individuals from various cultures. • Actively seeks to improve culture-specific and culture-general knowledge. • Continues to engage with people from a variety of cultures whether or not family, colleagues or friends agree or participate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humble. • Enjoys time with people of various cultures. • Chooses to nurture deeper friendships with individuals within various cultures who share common interests. • Sees the culture in individuals and individuals in culture. • Can appreciate various capacities of individuals within a variety of cultural affiliations and attachments without severing relationships with those who are more culturally rigid. • Works to develop relationships across social class. • Understands the role of dysfunction, trauma and abuse arising from cultural circumstances yet refuses to judge cultural groups from the behavior of troubled individuals, or to assume that individuals from wounded histories are automatically dysfunctional. • Can separate moral relativity from cultural relativity while maintaining perspective.

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