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**Transnationale Utopie?**

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**Milton J. Bennett, Dr.**, was a faculty member at Portland State University in Oregon, USA, where he created its graduate program in intercultural communication. He co-founded the Intercultural Communication Institute, the premier professional development program for interculturalists in the world, and he now consults worldwide with corporate executives and university professors on topics of intercultural diversity and competence.

**Gerhard P. Krejci.** After having worked for many years in international organisations, Gerhard has been working as a consultant, trainer, and coach in various European countries (mainly CEE). He has consulted on various team development processes and delivered workshops on leadership, team development and project management. He holds a university degree in International Business Administration from the University of Vienna.

## Interview with Milton J. Bennett

# Working with Culture: From Observation to Competence

*An interview with Milton J. Bennett at the SIETAR World Congress in Granada/Spain, October 21, 2008*

### What is Culture?

**Gerhard P. Krejci:** I would like to start with a general question about culture. In various books authors have identified more than 100 different ways to use the term culture.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible to define culture?

**Milton J. Bennett:** Well, you can define anything, so of course you can define culture. My feeling about culture as a topic, however, is that in general it refers to patterns of group behavior. It is meant to indicate a different level of analysis from an individual level, where we speak of one another in terms of personality. Culture allows us to speak of one another in terms of the ways in which we manifest group habits.

What exactly the group patterns are, is where those 100 definitions come from. Are they patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values, or are they patterns of ways of being, or are they some other specific sets of characteristics? There are many ways people have tried to define the ingredients of these patterns. But most generally, »culture« refers to the group level of analysis and the patterns of behavior of human beings maintained through interaction within the group.

### Objective and Subjective Culture

**What is your opinion of definitions that focus on artefacts, values, basic assumptions, norms, etc.?**

Once you define culture as a group level of analysis, you can deal with constituents of that analysis in more or less reified ways. What I mean by »reified« is the turning of an observational category into a »thing.« For instance, we might understand the cultural dimension of a difficulty in communication between Germans and U.S. Americans as related to a value difference between egalitarianism and hierarchy. When we treat the value difference as an observational category that allows us to understand a difference for some reason, it is less reified. The more we think that our observational categories have some kind of ongoing existence – for instance, that there really is such a thing as egalitarianism in the world – the more we have reified the observation.

Institutions such as political and economic structures, architecture, literature, and all those things that are typically described by history can be seen as products of culture;

that is, as products of groups of people who are cooperating in various ways to generate those things. The more you consider culture in terms of artefacts, the more you reify the concept of culture. By the way, Berger and Luckmann<sup>2</sup> called these products or artefacts of a culture »Objective Culture.«

But we can also point to the patterns themselves. These are the ways in which people cooperate with one another to generate certain kinds of behavior. You and I, for instance, are cooperating right now in having a conversation in which there are some rules about who listens, who talks, how we make eye contact with one another, what kind of reinforcements – as you are nodding your head right now – you are giving me for continuing in this way. All of these things are agreements that we have (or that we are creating) about how to have a conversation. The conversation itself is the product of this, but the way in which we are engaged in this conversation is the pattern of behavior. According to Berger and Luckmann, this would be »Subjective Culture« – the kind of culture that we carry around with us, or the worldview that guides our group-related experience of the world.

In all cases, however, we should remember that culture is a way of observing something. Culture is really not a thing so much as it is an observational strategy. When we apply that strategy to observing human behavior, it generates patterns of group behavior that we call »culture.« But the group patterns that we describe are themselves products of our observational strategy. One of the confusions about culture, I think, is allowing the idea of culture to become so reified that we begin to treat culture as if it has an actual existence, as opposed to a way in which we are looking at some aspect of human behavior.

### Intercultural Training

As a conclusion of these ideas for training and education, it would make sense to focus on both sides: the objective and the subjective side of culture.

Depending on what your goal is. If the goal is knowledge of the products of one group versus another, then you would like to focus on objective culture. If the goal is to become more competent in communicating in another culture, the focus should be on the subjective culture. Knowing about the objective culture does not generate much skill in communicating in the other culture.

How could individuals like managers, team members, consultants, students, and so on, be prepared for cultural communication and thus become culturally more competent?

That is a very large subject. In general, we become more competent in dealing with other cultures because we are able to see the world more in their cultural way – that is, that we have access to worldviews other than our own. Then we can allow our behavior to be channelled in ways that are more appropriate to the other culture. How we come to having such access is of course the basis of training strategies, educational approaches, and other aspects of developing intercultural competence.

Our educational systems have largely been oriented towards objective culture. In general, people tend to think that if you have knowledge of something you therefore have competence in that thing. You can think of lots of situations where that is really not true. For instance, one can have knowledge of the human body and not be skilled in performing surgery. Similarly, having knowledge of different institutions – economic, political, social, artistic – does *not* necessarily lead to access to the other worldview and the potential for exercising intercultural competence. While skills usually demand knowledge, it is not equally the case that knowledge generates skill.

As we are thinking about preparing people to work cross-culturally, it is rather important that preparation should begin at the subjective cultural level and then include some objective culture as appropriate to illustrate the subjective cultural process.

Knowledge is also knowledge about yourself. However, it does not seem very helpful to me if you, for example, do a self-assessment which delivers results like »I am low in power distance and highly individualistic.«

I disagree. On the contrary, I think that it is helpful to have an awareness of how you yourself could be described culturally. Whether it is in terms of Hofstede<sup>3</sup> categories or in some of the many other ways of describing cultural differences, I think it is a necessary part of this process to understand how you yourself could be described in cultural

- 1 Kluckhohn Clyde & Strodtbeck Frank F. (1966): Variations in value orientations. Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson.
- 2 Berger Peter L. / Luckmann Thomas (1966): The Social Construction of Reality. New York: Doubleday.
- 3 Hofstede Geert / Hofstede Gert Jan, (2005): Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. New York [et al.]: McGraw-Hill.

terms. If we don't understand our own cultural context, then it is difficult to see how others might be different from that. It is important for us to have »cultural self-awareness« as well as awareness of other cultures. Of course one needs to avoid the trap of reification again, lest the descriptions of your own cultural identity be taken as more than a product of some observational strategy.

Important though it is, cultural self-awareness in itself is insufficient to generate the skills in gaining access to an alternative cultural perspective. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for intercultural competence.

### Intercultural Teams

Especially today, we work more and more in international teams with different compositions and high diversity. Most of such teams are composed of individuals with different backgrounds. I would like to ask your opinion on how such a cultural diverse team could be prepared for good cooperation.

That gives a kind of concrete context for the next part of the process of becoming interculturally competent.

People on teams have long been guided into describing their personal differences in terms such as the MBTI (Myers/Briggs Type Indicator) categories of »INFJ« or »ENTP.« These and other individual-level systems such as Kolb's Learning Styles are useful for people to understand how their personal differences affect team performance for worse or for better. But in addition to knowing individually who we are, we need to understand how we are also manifestations or representatives of groups that we have been socialized into. People on culturally diverse teams need to be able to describe themselves and others in cultural terms. They need to have cultural self-awareness and also other culture awareness.

Still, having the knowledge that other cultures are different does not necessarily allow us to analyze how those differences will affect our communication or our work on a team. We need to be able to see how cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding – how your worldview rules for coordinating events may be different from my rules, leading to a reduction or even a cessation in cooperative behavior.

Once we understand how predictable misunderstandings occur in those situations, the next step is to plan the actions we can mutually take to address those misunderstandings. Is it sufficient to simply say, »Well, we have

- ◆ »Virtual Third Culture« ... is a unique
- ◆ culture that is specific to the
- ◆ group or to particular individuals
- ◆ interacting within that group
- ◆

these cultural differences.«? Or is there some additional activity that we must engage in? I believe that there is. This additional activity is learning how to take the other cultural perspective. We are then able to discover how other team members are observing and experiencing in their cultural terms the same events that we are observing and experiencing in our cultural terms.

By having access to that information we are then finally able to pose questions and make statements that make sense in their context. And they are able to do the same in our context. When that process occurs mutually it generates a kind of third culture position. I call it »Virtual Third Culture« – the interactional space that is created when culturally self-aware people intentionally attempt to coordinate their multicultural behavior. The result is not the imposition of any one of the diverse cultures of the team. Rather, it is a unique culture that is specific to the group or to particular individuals interacting within that group. And if the group is not interacting that space goes away. It is a virtual third culture – it does not maintain itself outside the context of its ongoing creation. In virtual third culture, people are able to shift their perspective rather easily and thus generate a very productive work situation. That space is only created when the previous conditions that we have discussed are satisfied. Meaning that:

- a. I have some idea about my own culture in subjective terms and
- b. how that might be different to others in those terms;
- c. I am able to analyze our cultural interaction and predict misunderstandings, and
- d. I have some idea about how to take your perspective or to empathize with you in a way that allows us mutually to generate the interactional space of virtual third culture.

So that is a long answer to your question »How would you prepare a team?« You would prepare a team by systemat-

ically moving through these different steps of preparation. This takes some time, of course. It does not happen in an hour. If organizations would like to have value from diverse teams, they need to invest some time for getting that value. Our experience indicates that when that investment is made, there is a vivid payoff. It is a good cost-benefit situation.

#### Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

At this point we should talk about the individuals' development. I found your Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity<sup>4</sup> (the DMIS) interesting.

By sensitivity I mean the ability to make discriminations, to see differences. So it is sensitivity in the more general, physiological sense of being sensitive to warmth, or being sensitive to a taste; and not sensitivity in the sense of emotional sensitivity. And it was one of my observations that people who are able to make these discriminations about cultural differences appear to be better at doing the kind of intercultural communication that we were discussing. My idea is that sensitivity is the deeper condition that allows for competence to be exercised. And so the developmental model is a way of describing how people move along a continuum as they develop more sophistication in being able to experience cultural differences, and thus, more potential to exercise intercultural competence.

Another impetus for creating the model was to guide the educational efforts. Prior to the DMIS, much training and education was being done in a kind of haphazard way – a potpourri of exercises, activities, and topics. But nobody had a very good idea why you should do one thing before or after another. What the DMIS does is to suggest that some activities are less threatening and more useful for bringing about initial discriminations in culture. And then, as people become better at making basic discriminations, there are other activities and topics that allow them to experience those discriminations in more sophisticated ways. Training activities need to be lined up in a kind of developmental sequence. If you try to do a too advanced activity too soon it is either wasted or actually may antagonize or cause people to leave the educational situation. But if you do too simple things, too often nobody gets much better at it, or they get bored and frustrated. So it is the matching of appropriate support and challenge to the development of this cultural sensitivity that can guide a trainer or educator in generating the best possible program.

That sounds to me as if it supports a tailored approach to training and coaching.

Sure. Because every group is different, we have to do some needs analysis. I do it through interviewing or observation or through the use of the »Intercultural Development Inventory«<sup>5</sup> instrument. And in one or a combination of these ways we can target the issues that the particular group is dealing with, and address those issues more directly. And that allows us to leverage training for the highest benefit.

#### Requirements for Consultants and Trainers

What should consultants and trainers take into account when they want to be prepared for working internationally or with mixed cultures?

In DMIS terms, I suggest that trainers and educators themselves be able to operate in the more ethnorelative levels of the model, which means that they are able to accept and adapt to cultural differences. They should be able to recognize cultural differences, to analyze cultural interaction, and to take the perspective to some extent of other cultures.

In other words, consultants and trainers should have moved rather substantially beyond non-prejudicial relationships, where the idea is »We are all basically the same« and »We just need to create tolerance.« Minimization is not a very good place from which to facilitate other people's development. While we all need to address our prejudices, consultants and trainers also need to generate greater skills and competence in dealing with cultural differences.

So that means it becomes paramount for them to focus on differences as well as on similarities.

The way it usually works is that the recognition of similarity amongst human beings reduces the threat of differences initially. We can see each other as being just human beings and thus reduce some prejudice. But then we need to bring back the idea of cultural differences, so as to be able to deal with diverse situations. If we feel that the only

4 Landis Dan / Bennett Janet M. / Bennett Milton J. (2004): *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, Thousand Oaks, Calif. [u. a.]: Sage Publications.

5 Hammer, Mitchell R. / Bennett, Milton J. / Wiseman, Richard (2003): »The Intercultural Development Inventory: A measure of Intercultural Sensitivity« in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 27, pp. 421-443. Resources and references for the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): [www.idiinventory.com/](http://www.idiinventory.com/)

necessary thing to do is to be tolerant with one another, we get no value from the diversity.

Most organizations are interested not just in reducing the problem of diversity but in increasing the value of diversity. To do so, the trainer him- or herself needs to be operating with substantial amounts of acceptance and adaptation.

Thank you very much for your time.

## Background ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

### The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Dr. Milton J. Bennett<sup>6</sup> as a framework to explain the reactions of people to cultural difference.

He observed that individuals confronted cultural difference in some predictable ways as they learned to become more competent intercultural communicators. Using concepts from cognitive psychology and constructivism, he organized these observations into six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference.

The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations increases. The model is divided into two phases and six stages, or positions along a continuum. Each stage indicates a particular cognitive structure that allows cultural difference to be experienced and intercultural behavior to be enacted in particular ways. By recognizing the underlying experience of cultural difference, predictions about behavior and attitudes can be made and education can be tailored to facilitate development towards the next stage. Development occurs as the »primary orientation to cultural difference« moves along the continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, never entirely erasing all ethnocentrism but increasingly organizing intercultural experience in ethnorelative ways.



The first three DMIS stages are **Ethnocentric**, meaning that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way:

**Denial** of cultural difference: one's own culture is experienced as the only real one. Other cultures are avoided by maintaining isolation from differences.

**Defense** against cultural difference: one's own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one. The world is organized into »us and them,« where »we« are superior and »they« are inferior. In **Reversal of Defense**, »they« are superior such that one's own culture is demonized and other cultures romanticized.

**Minimization** of cultural difference: elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal. Because these absolutes obscure deep cultural differences, one's own unique cultural experience (including cultural privilege) and the uniqueness of other cultures may be trivialized.

The second three DMIS stages are **Ethnorelative**, meaning that one's own culture is experienced more in the context of other cultures.

**Acceptance** of cultural difference: one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Acceptance does not mean agreement—cultural difference may be judged negatively—but the judgment is not ethnocentric.

**Adaptation** to cultural difference: the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture. One's worldview is expanded to include constructs from other worldviews.

**Integration** of cultural difference: one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.



6 Bennett, Milton J. (1986). »A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity« in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 10 (2), pp 179-95.

Bennett, Milton J. (1993). »Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity« in Paige, Michael (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

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Resources and references for DMIS at [www.idrinstitute.org](http://www.idrinstitute.org)

Resources and references for the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): [www.idiinventory.com](http://www.idiinventory.com)