From Ethnocentrism to Ethnorelativism

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Due to rapid technological advancements, we find ourselves increasingly interconnected on a global scale in a myriad of ways. Therefore, acquiring intercultural competence has become a high priority for those desiring to live, work, and thrive in diverse environments. However, many are unaware of the hard work it takes to become culturally competent and to reject ethnocentric biases—as doing so requires persistent self-awareness and dedication (Livermore, 2015). This paper will discuss varying forms of ethnocentrism and offer recommendations for developing cultural competence.

To begin, Livermore (2015) reminds us that people "tend to underestimate the degree to which we ourselves are a product of culture" (p. 66). The strong influence of one's culture can create the false appearance of *universal norms*; however, many forget that *normalcy* is relative. Hence, such flawed assumptions lay the foundation for ethnocentrism, or the tendency to prefer and value one's own culture above others (Hammer, 2013). Deane (1991) reminds us that this processing is often done unconsciously. Thus, to better understand the degrees of cultural competency and the difference between ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, various models have been developed by social scientists, the most popular being the Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS model is divided into six parts—three ethnocentric stages and three ethnorelative ones (Lantz-Deaton, 2017). This paper will discuss these stages and reflect on Deane's (1991) recommendations for advancement from one stage to the next.

Ethnocentrism

According to Bennett (1993), the first ethnocentric stage is *denial*. This describes people who may be isolated from other cultures and consciously dismiss the existence of another

culture's values (Hammer, 2013). The denial stage is best summarized by chosen ignorance and

is perhaps the most egocentric stage. Additionally, Deane (1991) notes that a person in the denial

stage may attribute subhuman qualities to someone from a different culture. For example,

musings such as "Tokyo is no different than New York, lots of cars and tall buildings" (p. 1)

illustrate this stage. Hence, Deane (1991) recommends facilitating positive intercultural

experiences (e.g. ethnic luncheons, entertainment by cultural groups) that allow those in the

denial stage to note the differences between cultures in a non-threating way.

Next, the *defense* stage is when one acknowledges the existence of other cultures,

however, they continue to view their own culture as superior (Hammer, 2013). Those who

remain trapped in this stage likely fear change and may feel threatened by other cultures. Such

emotions may cause a defensive reaction when confronted with differing views. In fact, a

common reaction may be to malign differences and repeat negative stereotypes (Deane, 1991). It

is important to remember that this stage consists of examples which are both obvious and subtle.

For example, a person who repeats Islamophobic tropes or minimizes the actions of white

nationalists is in the defense stage. However, refusing to hire a Muslim person because they are

not the "right fit" for your company may also be an example of the defense stage. In other words,

prejudicial thoughts and feelings need not be vocalized in order for such beliefs to create harm.

Hence, Deane (1991) recommends pointing out the positive commonalities between different

cultures in order to equate value. By doing so, you can begin to remove fear from the equation

and with it, the instinctive defense mechanism to protect what you value from the unknown.

Nevertheless, doing so leads to the final ethnocentric stage of *minimization*, or the

tendency to focus on personal similarities without legitimizing other societies' broad cultural

frameworks (Hammer, 2013). In this stage, cultural differences are viewed as superficial (Deane

1991). However, this shortcut to inclusion (without acknowledging diversity) in order to create positive relations is insufficient. Research conducted by Lantz-Deaton (2017) studying the effectiveness of cultural competency programs developed for students in the UK found that many remain trapped in this level of ethnocentrism. Since most strategies developed by universities in their study emphasized immersion (e.g. facilitating interactions with foreign students on campus), Lantz-Deaton (2017) concluded that mere exposure is not enough to increase intercultural competency and is more akin to cultural tourism, or the simple collection of unusual experiences. Hence, "individuals have to do more than just be in the presence of cultural difference in order to learn," reflection and comprehension of such experiences are also necessary (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p. 534). Deane (1991) notes that some people traveling or living abroad remain trapped in this stage because it creates a façade of cultural sensitivity and reduces insecurities. Therefore, recommendations to ascend from *minimization* to *acceptance* include simulation exercises and acknowledgement that discomfort is part of the process (Deane, 1991).

Ethnorelativism

Perhaps the simplest example of the difference between the ethnocentric minimization stage and the ethnorelative acceptance stage can be distinguished by two popular hashtags: #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter. The former uses colorblindness to minimize the struggle of black individuals, while the latter embraces the existence of other experiences and recognizes the fear felt by that group. Thus, the *acceptance* stage is defined as acknowledgement and respect for another culture's values (Hammer, 2013), as well as a tolerance for ambiguity (Deane, 1991). Similarly, *acceptance* sounds culturally sensitive, but is not equivalent to intercultural competency. For example, less sincere motivations to learn about other cultures (e.g. speaking a foreign language to become more marketable) can prevent someone from

ascending to the next stage. Moreover, preference towards one's own culture may still be present

and attributed to feelings of competency or correctness (Deane, 1991). Deane (1991)

recommends emphasizing practical application in the form of intercultural communication skills,

and Lantz-Deaton (2017) notes that facilitative conditions for such exercises should include

"equal status, common goals, no intergroup competition, and support from authority figures" (p.

543). Thus, with practice, awareness, and under the right conditions, one may ascend from

acceptance to *adaptation*.

The *adaptation* stage is displayed by people who "adjust their attitudes and behavior to

accommodate and exist within a specific cultural context" (Hammer, 2013, p. 178). Empathy and

consideration for power dynamics or status exemplify of this stage, with people sometimes

identifying as bicultural or multicultural (Deane, 1991). A common example of this stage would

be an immigrant who expertly adapts from their culture to that of their new country. For instance,

someone from a culture in which affectionate greetings are the norm (e.g. Brazil) can adapt to a

culture in which less affectionate greetings, such as a polite smile and handshake (e.g. the U.S.),

are most common. Still, those in the adaptation stage may still hold ethnocentric views (Deane,

1991). Therefore, Deane (1991) recommends practicing adaptation skills in a face-to-face

context. Not only will this allow someone to practice their verbal communication skills but it can

also improve their nonverbal communication and relate their intercultural knowledge to real life.

Once these skills become second nature, the final stage, *integration*, has been reached.

According to Hammer (2013), a person in this stage "is comfortable switching identities within

one culture versus another" (p. 178). For example, bilingual or multilingual speakers will code-

switch depending on the context—this is often done subconsciously (e.g. a child who speaks to

their grandparents in a different language than they use with their friends or in school). While

this stage marks the highest level of cultural competency, it also has the potential to create

identity confusion (Deane, 1991). For instance, a first-generation American child may be teased

by peers for being 'foreign,' but while visiting extend family in their parents' home country, they

are teased for being 'too American.' Those who overcome such struggles offer the best

opportunity to bridge the divide between cultures. Their genuine understanding of cultural

nuances allows for effective communication, making them natural educators and advocates.

Hence, developing one's ability to understand, appreciate, and value other cultures

requires humility and hard work. As observed by Lantz-Deaton (2017), simple exercises in

cultural immersion or cultural tourism are not effective shortcuts. Therefore, "prejudice

reduction relative to [immersion] may be an aspect of intercultural development but it is not

synonymous" (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p. 544). Deane (1991) offers some recommendations to

increase cultural competency. However, it is important to remember that without discipline and

self-awareness, one can easily slip back into patterns of ethnocentric thinking.

Moreover, a supplementary dialogue about the creation of said cultural lessons and

experiences must also be included. As discussed above, financial or other less sincere motives

(e.g. learning Spanish to become marketable or hiring a brown person so your company appears

inclusive) is not an effective way to foster intercultural competency. Additionally, because those

in the integration stage may struggle with identity issues, the question arises whether it is

appropriate to relegate them as *de facto* interpreters, mediators, and teachers. It should not be the

role of multicultural (and/or diverse) individuals to teach tolerance. As Livermore (2015) notes,

"A deeper, altruistic drive is a far more sustainable motivation for cultural intelligence than

merely pursuing selfish interests… [C]ultural intelligence cannot exist apart from true care for

the world and for people" (p. 61). Thus, sincere motivations and respect for all individuals

involved in the learning process must be considered when developing programs to reduce

ethnocentrism and facilitate intercultural competence.

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