



## Intercultural Competence in International Cooperation



# Intercultural Competence in International Cooperation

## Text

Véronique Schoeffel,  
Françoise Gariazzo-Dessiex

## Redaction/Graphism

Noëmi Wertenschlag, Anita Langenegger

## Print

*cinfo*

## Orders

[www.cinfo.ch](http://www.cinfo.ch)

Center for Information,  
Counselling and Training for  
Professions relating to  
International Cooperation



© *cinfo* 10/2011  
Rue Centrale 121  
Case postale  
CH-2500 Bienne 7  
Tél. +41 32 365 80 02  
Fax +41 32 365 80 59  
[info@cinfo.ch](mailto:info@cinfo.ch)  
[www.cinfo.ch](http://www.cinfo.ch)

## Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>The idea of intercultural competence</b> _____	<b>03</b>
1.1	The concept of culture	03
1.2	The concept of intercultural communication	04
1.3	Intercultural competence: how the concept differs from one culture to another	05
<b>2.</b>	<b>Intercultural difficulties in international cooperation: some concrete examples</b> _____	<b>06</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Intercultural competence: a complex idea continually evolving</b> _____	<b>09</b>
3.1	Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity	09
3.2	Howell's model: four phases of competence development	11
<b>4.</b>	<b>Intercultural competence: what are the implications for international cooperation?</b> _____	<b>14</b>
4.1	In the countries where cooperation takes place	14
4.2	At headquarters	14
4.3	For consultants	15
4.4	In humanitarian aid	15
<b>5.</b>	<b>In conclusion</b> _____	<b>16</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Contributions of <i>cinfo</i> to the development of intercultural competence</b> _____	<b>17</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Bibliography</b> _____	<b>18</b>

# 1. The idea of intercultural competence

For Jean-Pierre Cattin, Director of Orientation Services for the Office of Orientation, Professional and Continuing Education (OFPC) in Geneva, competence is «knowing what to do in a situation». This brief definition applies perfectly to intercultural competence. A person competent at the intercultural level will know how to adapt his or her way of communicating to the culture of a conversational partner, and will also know how to understand in several subtly differentiated ways messages sent by conversational partners from different cultures. Planning a programme, giving or receiving feedback, arranging a meeting, resolving a conflict, or setting priorities is not done in precisely the same way from culture to culture, but must take into account the specifics of each situation.

Thus the old adage «Be who you are» is not enough when speaking of intercultural competence. Indeed, if «I am who I am», I always work in similar ways, running a great risk of behaving inappropriately in many cultural contexts.

On the other hand, «To know who you are» is essential. In order to be able to interact in culturally appropriate ways, it is in fact necessary to competently activate three levels of knowledge:

- knowledge of oneself, of one's own behaviour and of one's own cultural identity
- knowledge of the other and his or her culture (including the awareness of possible differences)
- awareness of the interaction, and of its different levels (values, non-verbal, communication styles, etc...)

## Some definitions

A definition, be what it may, is never neutral. Every attempt at a definition of intercultural competence is influenced by the environmental, cultural and philosophical universe surrounding the author.

Arasaratnam and Doerfel remind us that, «The study of competence in intercultural situations is often influenced by the definition of intercultural communication that the researcher adopts and by his or her own concept of competence». (Deardorff, 2009)

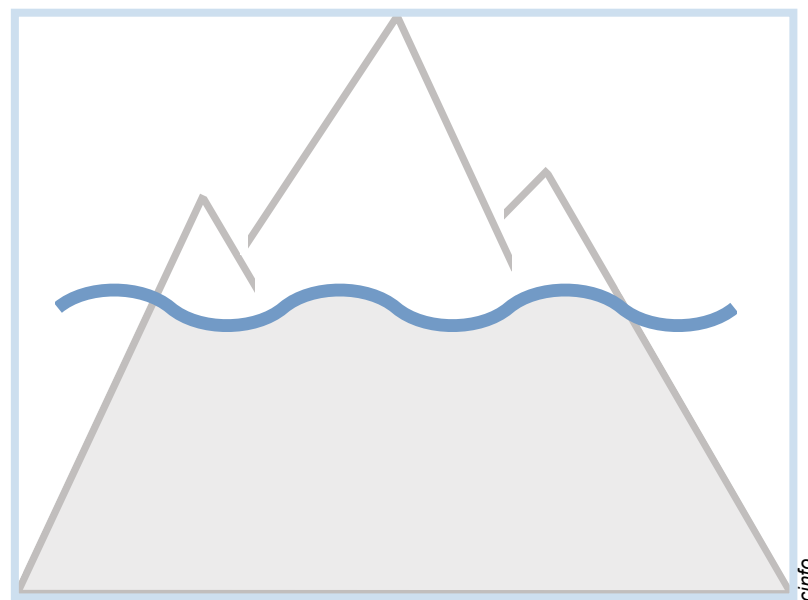
Therefore, the definitions offered below reflect the thought and the culture of their authors. They complement one another, and set us upon this challenging road strewn with paradoxes.

## 1.1 The concept of culture

In order to speak of intercultural communication, the concept of culture must be clarified.

When it comes to a definition of culture, the debate is long, occasionally hostile, often passionate. This article will not venture onto the field of exhaustive definition, but presents here two definitions of culture useful for discussing intercultural competence.

The metaphor of the iceberg is extremely useful when one speaks of culture in an intercultural context. An iceberg is in fact composed of a visible part and an infinitely larger invisible part. Culture likewise has visible aspects (food, architecture, language, non-verbal behaviour,



The iceberg

art, political or religious systems, etc.) and invisible aspects (values, beliefs, norms) which are much more important if one wants to try to understand culture. Together the visible and invisible aspects plus their interactions make up the culture of any given community.

#### Janet and Milton Bennett's definition

J. and M. Bennett define culture as, «A set of beliefs, values, and behaviours learned, shared and practiced by a group of interacting persons». This definition casts in relief both the visible side (behaviour) and the invisible side of the iceberg (values and beliefs).

#### 1.2 The concept of intercultural communication

The definitions of culture offered above definitely influence definitions of intercultural communication.

The metaphor reminds us that a successful intercultural interaction must take into account the visible and invisible aspects of both partners present. It also illustrates that collisions between icebergs, as between cultures, do not take place above the water, but at an invisible level. The great intercultural misunderstandings and challenges actually take place at the level of values and beliefs.

#### Stella Ting-Toomey

For Stella Ting-Toomey, every successful intercultural communication experience must include four essential components:

- Two actors or more (persons, families, institutions, countries, etc...)
- Of different cultures (using a very broad notion of culture)
- In interaction
- Negotiating common meaning

While the first three elements of this definition are classic, the fourth

point is the most important – and the most demanding. It enables not merely interaction, but opens the door to possible mutual understanding, in spite of numerous cultural unknowns.

#### Janet and Milton Bennett

Janet and Milton Bennett define intercultural competence as: «the capacity to communicate effectively in multicultural situations, and to interact in appropriate ways in a variety of different cultures».

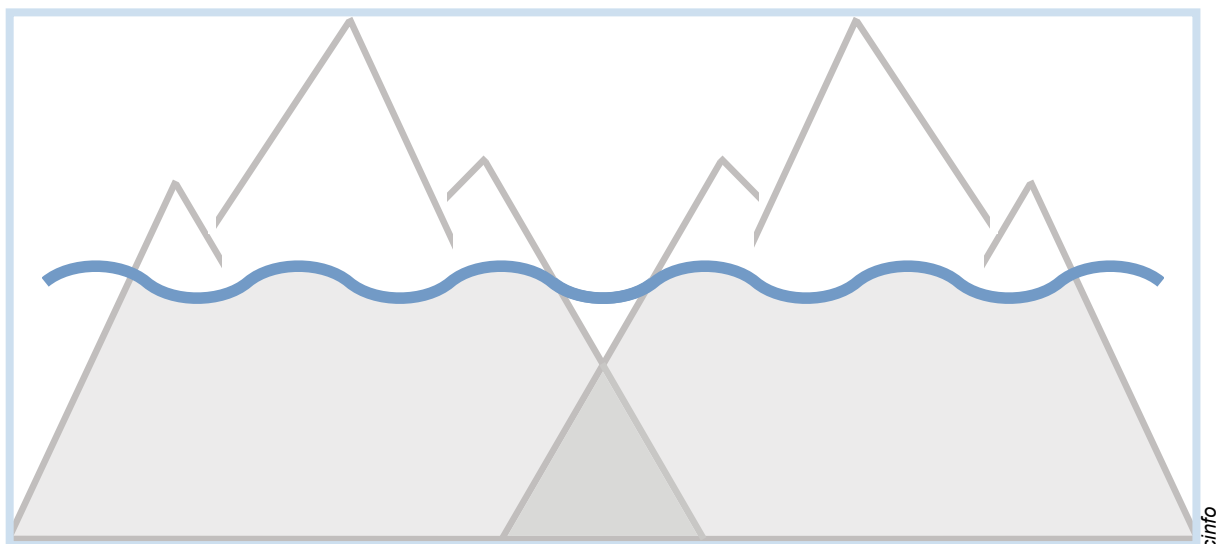
And Janet Bennett adds to this:

«A clear consensus is beginning to emerge on the subject of what constitutes intercultural competence: a collection of capacities and of cognitive, affective and behavioural characteristics which, when applied, allow effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.»

(Janet Bennett, 2008, p.97)

#### Mark A. Ashwill and Du'o'ng Thi Hoâng Oanh

For Mark A. Ashwill and Du'o'ng Thi Hoâng Oanh, «intercultural competence is generally viewed as a skill set that enables someone to function effectively in a cross-cultural setting or (...) the ability to work well in different cultures and with people of different origins. Intercultural competence is a multifaceted state of being – which includes knowing that there are cultural differences,



The double iceberg



what they are, and how to apply that knowledge. (...) Simply put, it is the ability to adapt to different cultural settings, the essence of being bicultural.»

(Ashwill and Thi Hoâng Oanh, in Deardorff, 2009, p. 143)

### 1.3 Intercultural competence: how the concept differs from one culture to another

Although definitions are numerous and often complementary, the majority of them are the work of Western specialists. But the concept of intercultural competence is far from being universal – it is cultural. «The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence», edited by Darla Deardorff, reminds us that the concept of intercultural competence developed in the West is seen very differently in Africa, Asia, Latin America, in the Arab coun-

tries, in China, in India or in Germany, for example. What makes a person competent at the intercultural level is not the same from one culture to another.

The following examples, taken from Deardorff's work, illustrate this proposition:

- In the **Arab world**, intercultural competence goes hand-in-hand with the development of a relationship. «It is relationships among the parties that give meaning, relevance and direction to all communication». (Zahama).
- Nwosu underlines the extent to which for **Africans**, identity is only apprehended in interaction with others. To communicate with a person thus implies taking into account his or her community and context.
- The **Andean** concept of «alli kawsay» (to live well) is based on re-

lations that are reciprocal, complementary and cooperative. (Medina Lopez-Portillo and Sinnigen)

- Chen and An note with regard to **China**, that the competence of a leader is measured by his or her capacity to set up harmonious relations.
- In **Vietnam**, intercultural competence is important to «make available the competencies necessary for the establishment of concrete and interpersonal relations, essential for the development between cultures of deep bonds that are mutually beneficial and lasting». (Ashwill and Du'o'ng)

## 2. Intercultural difficulties in international cooperation: some concrete examples

6

The examples below, experienced in various countries during international cooperation, illustrate the difficulty of negotiating common meaning as is suggested above by Stella Ting-Toomey.

### A meeting with the farmers

In central Asia, an expatriate colleague, head of the project and working with farmers in the region, sets up an appointment on a particular day at 14:00 for an important meeting. His local partner tries to hint (in vain) that another day, or at least a different hour, would be more appropriate. Indeed, in that season, the farmers were busy with work in the fields.

On the day set for the meeting, not a single farmer was there on time. Some wives were there to say that their husbands were in the fields and would come as soon as they could. They also announced that they had prepared a meal in honour of the visitors. The head expatriate became exasperated, felt disrespected, and after an hour went away, without having met with the farmers or tasted the dishes prepared in his honour. When they returned, the farmers felt insulted and disgraced. They had rushed to come back from the fields. They decided to suspend the collaboration. The local partner had to spend long months of negotiation to repair the blunder and to lay down again foundations for joint work.

### The midday meal

Within the staff of a project follow-up in central Asia, a team of 6 or 7 persons spent the morning mee-

ting some farmers who participated in the project and talking with them. At noon, the team of 6 or 7 people was invited to eat in the village. The head villager of the project had asked a family to provide the meal. Very quickly tension arose between, on the one hand, the importance of hospitality, of sharing a meal and paying respect to hosts and, on the other hand, the importance of being on time for the next appointment (set for 14:00 in town). Both priorities could not be respected... Which was more important? The expatriate visitors started to act impatient and irritated, declaring that they had eaten enough although the women of the house continued to prepare the main dish for the meal, and the local partners were pulled in two directions, caught between a rock and a hard place. It was decided not to remain for the final course, but to stay for the main dish, in order to save face.

In town, the local partners knew well that it would be impossible for the team to return by 14:00. They were not worried and had finished other tasks while waiting.

### Planning

«In Madagascar we are always in the aftermath of a cyclone. How



cinfo / Veronique Schoeffel

can you ask us to plan long term? And you want us to stick to the plan? We are happy if we survive and can rebuild our house. We do not have secure lives nor the comfort of your meeting rooms in Switzerland to make all these plans. For this reason we have many problems with our creditors.»

*A Malagasy partner*

in cold and dark places, uprooting them from our Pachamama!!».

#### The land

«For us, Andean farmers, the land is our mother, she is sacred. We pray to her, we respect her, we thank her, we do not exploit her. For you in the West, the land is just a tool. That confuses me and makes me afraid.»

*A Quechua woman, leader of the Movement of the Landless (Movimiento de los Sin Terra, MST), in Bolivia.*

#### «In order for the body to be calm, the head must be calm.»

A Western development worker is the head of a team in a hospital in western Africa. Being unhappy with certain incidents that had arisen in preceding days, she decides to inform her colleagues of her disappointment, frustration, and feelings during the next meeting. Unbeknownst to her, her tone is very exasperated and her emotions very strong, expressing great irritation. The team is frozen and silent. Everyone leaves the room, the meeting ends early. The development worker realizes her mistake, but what to do? During the following days, no one talks about it, not she herself nor the members of the team nor the director. One day, while meeting alone with the director,

#### Making the first contact

In a country in southern Africa, a young Western development worker is beginning her first day of work with her new colleagues in the country. After having been introduced by the management, she moves from one person to another, pen and paper in hand, to establish personal contact and to gather the first bits of information about her future colleagues. The offices are shared among several colleagues, thus each can hear what the others say. The new arrival, sure of herself, speaks loudly compared with the local colleagues and asks a whole series of questions of each person: name? marital status? age? children? home? religion? where you live? education? hobbies? etc...

Gradually the atmosphere in the offices becomes strained: much of this information is not public in the country, and certainly not given during a first contact. In addition, every response is heard by colleagues to whom one may not have spoken about such things. The information is given with bad grace, or perhaps the truth is altered a bit.

The expatriate colleague does not notice anything. She has collected the information, thinking that this first day has gone well and that she has established the first foundations of a positive and transparent collaboration.

#### Our potatoes cannot be shut up in your cold rooms

Bolivia is among the countries having the greatest variety of potatoes in the world. In order to learn about these varieties and to pre-

serve some specimens in a genetic bank, a European scientific team visited several Andean villages, talking with the farmers, asking that they show them the various cultivated potatoes and specific details about them. All went well at the level of collecting information, immensely rich for the researchers. Then came the final objective of the mission: to collect some specimens of each type in order to place them in an underground genetic bank in Europe. This request, which seemed so obvious for one group, completely changed the atmosphere and ran into a polite but categorical and shocked refusal from the other group. «The potato is sacred. It is like our child, we cannot allow it to submit to such a thing. It is connected to our land, our Pachamama. You cannot take our potatoes away for that. How can you want to shut up our potatoes for eternity



he says: «You know, Isabelle (a fictitious name), for the body to be calm, the head must be calm.» This is the only feedback she ever received on the subject of that incident.

### Meals

«At the office, at lunchtime, when you have something to eat, you always share it with those who are present. When our expatriate colleagues eat their lunch alone, and without sharing their food, it is very strange for us. We have the impression of being shut out, of being pushed to the side. It also seems that they do not understand our culture. Do they not see our way of sharing? That should give them an example to follow here.»

*A situation heard in Namibia and in Bolivia.*

In each of these incidents, the cultural values of the people in interaction are different, causing them to perceive and to prioritise things differently. Each behaves in a way coherent with their own values, while showing little intercultural sensitivity for finding a more appropriate common solution.



### 3. Intercultural competence: a complex idea continually evolving

The acquisition of intercultural competencies allows for the avoidance of a good number of the above incidents and the increase of the effectiveness of international cooperation.

The best known tool is certainly the DMIS (Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity) developed by Janet and Milton Bennett, which

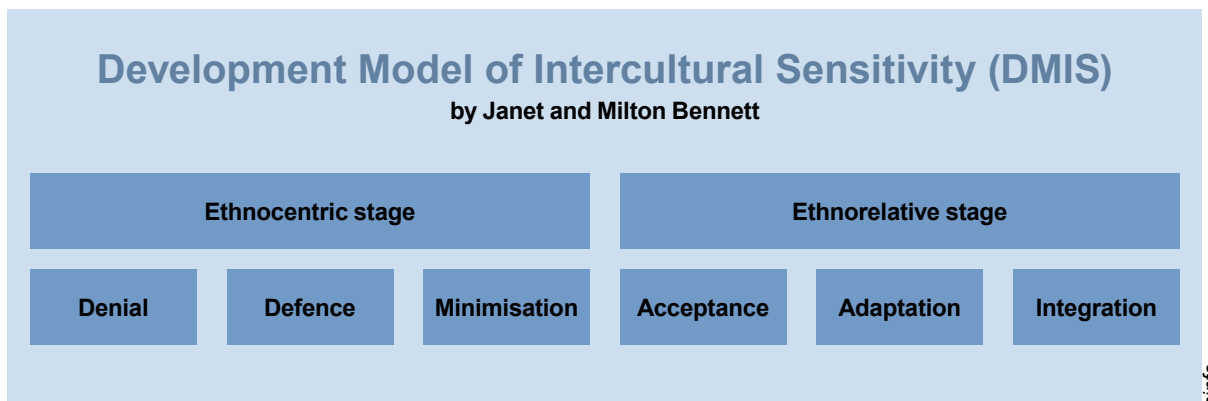
approach. The six steps are divided among two different fundamental phases, the one called by the Bennetts «ethnocentrism» (stages one to three), the other called «ethnorelativism» (stages four to six).

The model, presented as a continuum, suggests an evolution and a transformation in the relationship with cultural difference and in the

phase, people are generally limited to very elementary stereotypes for talking about others. «I was in Japan... they all have squinty eyes.» or «I was in Nairobi. It's like it is here, a large modern city.»

#### Stage 2: Defence

In this stage, one realizes that the other exists, has a culture. This culture is a potential danger to my own



proposes six stages of developing competence with respect to cultural difference.

William Howell's tool proposes four stages of the development of intercultural competence. While this tool is less complex, it nevertheless addresses a great pedagogical concern when it considers how to adjust and support the development of these competencies, or the selection of personnel with a given level of intercultural competence.

#### 3.1 The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

The tool of Janet and Milton Bennett is inspired by a constructivist

complexity of intercultural interaction. In the three first stages, people seek by preference to avoid cultural difference, and have very simple categories for talking about culture and intercultural interaction. Gradually through the development of intercultural competencies, an interest in difference grows, along with the complexity of observation and interaction

#### Stage 1: Denial

For people in this stage, the other does not exist as a complex and interesting cultural being. Reasons can be varied: lack of any experience interacting with cultural difference, or a decision to ignore cultural difference (apartheid). In this

if I do not protect myself from it. Either I consider it inferior to mine (they are boorish, they oppress women, not civilized), or I consider mine superior (our culture is more sophisticated, respectful, etc.). In this stage there is also a phenomenon, well known in international cooperation, where expatriate personnel sometimes consider the culture of the place they are assigned superior to their own culture. Bennett names this behaviour «reversal», their culture is superior to mine. («Ah, the people of Bhutan, they understood all about spirituality», or «The community life in Mali is so much more human than our individualism.»).

Whether one is defensive or in «reversal», one of the two cultures is always perceived as superior to the other.

### Stage 3: Minimisation

In this stage, one does not consider the culture of the other as a menace any longer. In stage 3 of the DMIS, we think we are all the alike, differences are only on the surface, underneath we are all the same. It is in this stage where one minimizes and ignores differences, and where one prefers to talk of what is similar. This is a phase where people are very happy to feel connected with everyone, a phase in which they forget to ask the crucial question : «We are all the same as whom...?» and the answer is «all the same as... me». I am still on the ethnocentric side, and I still see myself as the cultural reference point.

Between stages 3 and 4, the person has experiences that show him or her that differences are not only on the surface, but are very real and deep. At that time, people either return to stage 2 or advance into stage 4, and thus move into the ethnorelative phase of the model.

### Stage 4: Acceptance

In this stage, the person has entered the ethnorelative stage, and recognizes that his or her own culture is neither the centre of the world nor the only and best reference point. Stage 4 is characterised by an interest in other cultures, a thirst for knowledge and understanding of the workings of different cultures.

### Stage 5: Adaptation

While during stage 4 the person is

interested in knowing about cultures, in stage 5 he or she will want to begin to interact in an appropriate manner, to apply knowledge that has been acquired. Stage 5 is where one applies understandings and intercultural competence that have been developed. The person knows how to behave differently and in an appropriate manner in a variety of contexts. The palette of intercultural competencies is expanded.

### Stage 6: Integration

As a result of interacting in differentiated ways with people of different cultures, the cultural identity of a person is transformed. Little by little, one integrates into oneself elements of different cultures and develops a multicultural identity, with all its richness and opportunities, but also its pain and challenges. The integration of diverse cultures within oneself allows entering into different cultural perspectives and understanding one situation from different angles.

### Examples

Examples of different responses given according to the stage of the DMIS to the question, «Did you discover any special foods during your vacation in country X?»:

**Denial:** «During our vacation, we always ate in very good restaurants of international standing. You can eat over there the same as at home, there's no difference.»

**Defence:** «Those people don't know how to cook. Our food is much better and more delicious than theirs.»

**Minimisation:** «Everyone needs to eat, and everyone has local specialties. When I wanted to, I ate; when I didn't want to, I didn't eat.»

**Acceptance:** «We found many interesting things at the market, we have wonderful photos, and we tasted many new things. It is so fascinating to see the differences and the wealth of foods from one culture to another.»

**Adaptation:** «We were invited to a wedding, and we tasted typical dishes prepared for the occasion. Not only were the dishes special for only this occasion, but the serving of them also followed very clear rules. It was fascinating and a true challenge to try to behave in the right way and to eat in a culturally appropriate manner. When I had difficulty with a dish, I only took a little of it, to honour the hosts and participate in the festivities.»

**Integration:** «Through our interactions with people of different cultures, we have learned to appreciate very different dishes and flavours. During our vacation, we were able to savour this richness, in all its social and cultural dimensions, not only the culinary.»

### Application of the model in international cooperation

The DMIS is of interest for international cooperation at several levels:

For recruitment:

- The model gives organisations a structure for analysis and reflection that allows them to identify

the level of intercultural competence they want to solicit

- It also allows the organisation to clarify the level of intercultural competence for specific functions
- It gives recruitment specialists a very useful perspective on the level of intercultural competence of people with whom they are in discussion during an assignment process
- It makes clear the intercultural competencies which a specialist who recruits people of different cultures must test for.

For training:

- The DMIS allows trainers to adapt the content of a course to the level of intercultural competence of the participants
- It also allows adaptation of teaching methods to the level of participants
- The model allows identification of the appropriate level of follow-up and support for persons preparing for an assignment abroad
- Many people who make a career of international cooperation de-

### 3.2 Four phases of the development of competence: the William Howell model

While the DMIS is centred around perceptions of the other and of difference, the Howell model is centred upon stages of the development of competence in such interaction.

#### Unconscious incompetence

At this stage, a person is not aware of intercultural differences, of the idea of intercultural competence, nor of his or her own mistakes in intercultural situations. The person says inappropriate things without realizing it, does not understand the messages that are addressed to him or her, and does not understand the culture in which he or she works... **but does not realize this.** Such people begin from the assumption that all humans are fundamentally alike, and they do not see when they make mistakes. They have confidence in their perception of things, in the words they say, and in their interpretation of what they see or hear. They express them-

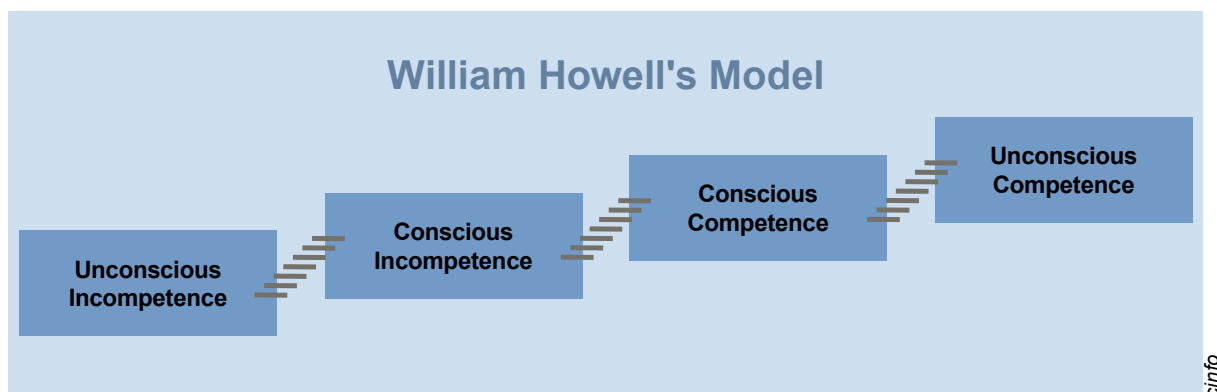
limits in this matter, recognizing that things are not as simple as he or she thought. They realize that they do not always know how to express themselves in the most appropriate way, nor decode various messages received. They do not understand the culture in which they work well enough to be able to function there in a constructive manner. This confuses and worries them.

They know that they must acquire knowledge and develop some competencies, and are ready to make the necessary effort.

#### Conscious competence

In this stage, the person is capable of analyzing intercultural issues in interactions with various partners, and knows how to take account of their culture in his or her manner of expressing and interpreting their messages. But this requires constant attention, with hesitations and detailed and conscious preparation.

Perhaps the person is in a situation where he or she knows well the sta-



velop a multicultural identity, often experienced as bad and badly managed because it is not recognized and validated by others and for lack of tools to discuss particular challenges of such an identity. Specific trainings developed for people who have arrived at stage 6 can allow them to recognize their quality, to gain greater clarity and peace regarding their cultural identity

velop a multicultural identity, often experienced as bad and badly managed because it is not recognized and validated by others and for lack of tools to discuss particular challenges of such an identity. Specific trainings developed for people who have arrived at stage 6 can allow them to recognize their quality, to gain greater clarity and peace regarding their cultural identity

#### Conscious incompetence

In this phase, the person recognizes challenges in intercultural communication and a concern for developing knowledge and competencies in this domain. Such a person is conscious of his or her own

kes involved in intercultural communication, but not the specific culture in which he or she is situated. How to choose the appropriate style of communication, at the verbal and non-verbal levels? How to take account in a discerning way of cultural value orientations?

#### Unconscious competence

At this stage, a comfortable mastery of essential aspects of intercultural issues allows the person to adjust immediately those things that need

attention. He or she is capable of adapting behaviours in a quasi-automatic and appropriate way. In cultures which they know deeply, such people know how to move appropriately. When they work in countries or cultures less well known, automatic response must be dimmed during the time required to understand the culture sufficiently. At this stage, the person has the potential to transmit competencies to others, to become a trainer.

#### Examples

Examples of different behaviour according to the stages of the Howell model, in the following situation: «In Pakistan, a team made up of two male and two female Western development workers meet with an Imam, in order to discuss together the construction of a school in the village. Only one of the women speaks the language of the Imam».

#### Unconscious incompetence

«The team designates the woman as the one who speaks with the Imam, because she is the only one who speaks the language. A person at this stage does not ask any other questions.»

#### Conscious incompetence

«The team strongly suspects that interactions with an Islamic dignitary are formal and must respect a protocol, but they did not have time to prepare for that and are going to try not to make too many mistakes. They recognize afterwards the errors made.»

#### Conscious competence

«The team meets, discusses and decides the best way to approach the meeting with the Imam: Who should be the speaker? The woman who speaks the language? (linguistic competence put first); The man with the highest status, with the help of the colleague as translator? (hierarchy and gender dimensions put first); Should they arrange to be accompanied by a high-ranking local colleague and trust him with the role of speaker? (cultural competence put first).»

#### Unconscious competence

«The team knows that the person who talks with the Imam must be of a status that honours him in the extreme, and will choose such a person to conduct the discussion.»

#### Application of the model in international cooperation

The Howell model is of interest for international cooperation at several levels:

For recruitment:

- The model alerts recruiters of the danger of recruiting personnel who are in stage one, that is to say, people who are not conscious of their intercultural incompetence.
- The model gives organisations a structure for analysis and reflection that allows them to identify the level of intercultural competence they want to solicit.
- It also allows the organisation to clarify the level of intercultural competence for specific functions.
- It takes time, with experience and reflection, to arrive at the level of unconscious, automatic competence. Unfortunately, shorter and shorter missions allow people to arrive at level four more and more rarely.
- With assignments abroad being shorter and shorter, it is necessary to recruit personnel that already have well-developed intercultural competencies (at least level three).

For training:

- The model reminds us that people will only make an effort to develop new competencies if they are conscious of their lack of competence in the area.
- Intercultural training must respect the level of competence present in the group. According to Howell, many trainings fail because the workshop leaders assume that the participants are at least at step two, and they train them to move toward three. But many participants are in fact at stage one and must first be made interested in intercultural interaction, in its importance, before they will want to develop competencies in it.
- Practicing competencies is essential to internalize them and make them automatic, otherwise the risk of regression is real. Constant training and analysis of experiences allows avoidance of this trap. It is nevertheless possible to regress from stage four to three, or from three to two. In this case, the conscious work of study and practice must be repeated in order to reach the previous level.
- At level 3, people need the possibility of complex interactions, and a system of support in order to anchor their learning.
- The danger inherent in phase four is to rest on one's laurels, and to stop educating oneself, relying on the patterns and behaviours which, while reliably automatic, are quickly out of touch with new developments.



cinfo / Marcel Kaufmann

## 4. Intercultural competence: what are the implications for international cooperation?

International cooperation provides services to people of different cultures. Given this, intercultural communication is the daily bread of the majority of its players, in the host country on one side, when local partners and expatriates try to understand one another in order to be able to collaborate, or between headquarters and the offices of local partners on another side, when telephone exchanges or e-mails are often laden with mysteries which are hard to decode.

### 4.1 In the countries where cooperation takes place

In the country which hosts the cooperation, multicultural teams face many intercultural challenges before being able to work in an optimal way:

- Integration of expatriate partners:
  - They are often seeking a difficult balance among the need to work rapidly, initial ignorance of the host culture, and intercultural competencies which are often insufficient to manage the phases of integration well.
  - The culture shock process is common. During this period, one is generally not very open to learning about culture and to developing intercultural competencies.
  - For many young expatriates, missions abroad are often their first experience of confronting great material poverty, which constitutes an additional destabilising factor. Facing poverty, and with assignments of short duration, the temptation is strong to want to work quickly, according to procedu-

res which are known (at home), rather than to try to understand and move forward with people of the host country.

- In international cooperation, good intentions upon departure (solidarity, generosity, ...) are often accompanied by an expectation of immediate trust from local partners. Disillusionment can be great when one realizes that, even in international cooperation, trust is earned and constructed little by little.
- Inequality in terms of knowledge and power can create tensions within a team. The expatriates are often highly qualified in their field, but not very competent in the host culture. Their knowledge must be connected to local knowledge and competencies, which exist as well.
- The length of the assignment:
  - These are shorter and shorter, and make true understanding of the host culture impossible, though this is the foundation of long-lasting projects.
  - These shorter and shorter assignments are often coupled with stronger and stronger pressure for results... which is paradoxical. In fact, an understanding of culture, necessary for lasting projects and for the effectiveness of assignments, is impossible under these conditions.
- The majority of tools for administration, planning, follow-up, etc. were developed in the «North» and based on «Northern» cultu-

res. How to use these with people of the «South» who have a «Southern» culture?

### 4.2 At headquarters

Also at the head office, intercultural communication makes up part of daily practice:

- At headquarters, communication with «the field» happens via virtual communication: e-mail, telephone, skype, and social networks. While the tools are the same, the norms of use of these tools are quite different from one culture to another. Should information primarily be synthesized or spelled out in detail? Oriented to the content or to the relationship?
- Often, priorities and urgencies are very different at the head office and in the field: one (headquarters) absolutely needs a report or an urgent response, while the other (in the field) perhaps has urgencies of an entirely different sort.
- Administrative requirements never stop growing in the North, and are perceived in the South as time «stolen» from the work of cooperation in the field. Priorities are very different.
- In international organisations, personnel come from very diverse cultures, and each has his or her way of viewing priorities, roles and process.
- International cooperation suffers stronger and stronger political and financial pressures, bringing budgetary reductions and the obligation to abandon certain projects. These decisions are often difficult to communicate in the field in an appropriate way.

### 4.3 For consultants

Consultants are a large and important category of professionals in international cooperation:

- While the process of integration is not an issue for them, they must work in the face of other intercultural challenges. How to understand the complexity of a context sufficiently when being in the place for only a few days, and write respectful reports on this complexity? In the «South» one often hears, «These consultants come, write their reports, evaluate us, but they do not understand us».
- Do the consultants understand the principal intercultural dimensions to which they must be attentive during their visit? For example, do they know how to decode indirect messages, to limit direct interventions, to manage time in different ways? Can they include relational time in their agenda, to honour the hospitality of their hosts?
- Extremely multicultural teams, often including very different ways of viewing work, hierarchy, priorities, yet needing to organize themselves for complex tasks.
- Very high turnover of personnel, resulting in teams that are constantly forming so that local partners must continually adapt themselves to new colleagues.

### 4.4 In humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid also includes a series of specific intercultural challenges within the nature of its work:

- Working under conditions which are often precarious and stressful, ill-suited to the development of intercultural competencies.
- Living quarters often disconnected from the rest of the population.



## 5. In conclusion

The questions are numerous and answers always depend on the situation. Whether one works in humanitarian aid or for the long term, at headquarters or in the field, as consultant or as expatriate, the acquisition of a minimal package of knowledge about intercultural communication issues and key dimensions allows us to act in a more competent and lasting way with our partners.

The fact of being generous and competent in one's field is not sufficient for carrying out sustainable work in an international context that is (by definition) intercultural. Intercultural competence makes the difference, and, like all other competencies, must be acquired. *cinfo* and many other training institutes offer many services in this area.

Research coordinated by Darla Deardorff and cited above suggests that a competent development worker must know how to put into practice knowledge of self, of the local culture, and intercultural dimensions appropriate for each situation. Janet Bennett adds that «the capacity for empathy and stress management contributes in a significant manner to the quality of intercultural interaction and the establishment of connections».  
(*Deardorff, 2009, p. 131-132*)

This document has reflected on the importance of intercultural communication in the context of international cooperation. But in fact, according to Darla Deardorff, the stakes are even greater: it concerns the question of survival «This search for intercultural competence un-

derscores the need for genuine respect and humility as we relate to one another, meaning that we arrive at the point of truly valuing each other and, in so doing, bridge those differences through relationship building. In the end, intercultural competence is about our relationships with each other and, ultimately, our very survival as the human race, as we work together to address the global challenges that confront us.»  
(*Darla Deardorff, 2009, p. 269*)

## 6. Contributions of *cinfo* to the development of intercultural competence

*cinfo* places its intercultural competencies at the disposal of international cooperation by offering:

- Intercultural courses and training in Switzerland, through its own course programme, or in conjunction with partner organisations.
- Intercultural courses and training in the field, for multicultural teams that work together.
- Advice and coaching to institutions hoping to develop their own intercultural competencies within the organisation.
- Pedagogical material specialized in the interface between international cooperation and intercultural communication.

### Collection of case studies:

- Volume 1
- Volume 2
- Volume 3 (appearing in 2012)

### Articles:

- *Méthodes participatives et enjeux interculturels* (Véronique Schoeffel and Sylvie Roman)
- *When deep commitment leads to deep conflict – or why cultural fluency is essential in international cooperation* (Michelle LeBaron)
- *La prise de Constantinople ou quelle formation pour la CI?* (Ruedi Hoegger)
- *A cultural approach for HIV/AIDS related projects: the need for intercultural competency* (Véronique Schoeffel)

[www.cinfo.ch](http://www.cinfo.ch)



## 7. Bibliography

- BARLEY, Nigel, ENDERWITZ, Ulrich (Übersetz.). *Traumatische Tropen: Notizen aus meiner Lehmhütte*. 8. Aufl. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006
- BARRIER, Guy. *La communication non verbale: comprendre les gestes: perception et signification*. 4ème éd. – Issy-les-Moulineaux: esf éditeur, 2008. (Formation permanente)
- BENNETT, Milton J. (Ed.) *Basic concepts of intercultural communication*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1998
- CHHOKAR, Jagdeep S., BRODBECK, Felix C., HOUSE, Robert J. (Eds.). *Culture and Leadership across the World*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007
- DEARDORFF, Darla K. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Los Angeles [...]: Sage Publ., 2009
- De PURY, Sybille. *Comment on dit dans ta langue? Pratiques ethnopsychiatriques*. Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2005
- EDMUNDSON, Andrea. *Globalized e-learning cultural challenges*. Hershey [...]: Information Science Publ., 2007
- HÖGGER, Rudolph. *Wasserschlange und Sonnenvogel: Die andere Seite der Entwicklungshilfe*. Frauenfeld: Im Waldgut, 1993
- KEALEY, David J., PROTHEROE, David R. *Les collaborations interculturelles: pour une coopération Nord-Sud plus efficace*. Hull, Québec: Centre d'apprentissage interculturel, Institut canadien du service extérieur, 2001
- KUMBIER, Dagmar, SCHULZ VON THUN, Friedmann (Hrsg.). *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: Methoden, Modelle, Beispiele*. Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006. (Miteinander reden. Praxis)
- LANDIS, Dan, BENNETT, Janet, BENNETT, Milton J. (Eds.). *Handbook of intercultural training*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publ., 2004
- MALETZKE, Gerhard. *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: zur Interaktion zwischen Menschen verschiedener Kulturen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996
- NISBETT, Richard E. *The geography of thought: how Asians and Westerners think differently... and why*. New York [...]: Free Press, 2003
- OERTIG-DAVIDSON, Margaret. *Beyond chocolate: understanding Swiss culture*. Basel: Bergli Books, 2002
- SHEEHY, Maureen, NAUGHTON, Frank, O'REAGAN, Collette. *Partners intercultural companion to training for transformation: exercises, processes, resources, and reflections for intercultural work*. Dublin: Partners Training for Transformation, 2007
- TING-TOOMEY, Stella. *Communicating across cultures*. New York; London: The Guilford Press, 1999. (The Guilford communication series)
- VERHELST, Thierry. *Des racines pour l'avenir: cultures et spiritualités dans un monde en feu*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008
- VERHELST, Thierry. *Des racines pour vivre: Sud-Nord: identités culturelles et développement*. Paris: Duculot, 1987



---

---