


# Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

 Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity describes the developmental stages along which people can progress toward a deeper understanding and appreciation of cross-cultural differences

Originally developed by **Milton Bennett** in 1986, and updated multiple times since, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is one of the more influential models in the fields of intercultural communication, engagement, and equity. Sometimes called the “Bennett Scale,” the model describes the standard ways in which people experience, interpret, and interact across cultural differences, and it proposes a developmental continuum along which people can progress toward a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural variance, as well as greater social facility when negotiating cross-cultural dissimilarity. Bennett founded the **Intercultural Development Research Institute** to support related research and practical applications of the model.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is based on decades of academic research and on formal observations of cross-cultural dynamics in schools, communities, and organizations. According to Bennett, “As one’s perceptual organization of cultural difference becomes more complex, one’s experience of culture becomes more sophisticated and the potential for exercising competence in intercultural relations increases. By recognizing how cultural difference is being experienced, predictions about the effectiveness of intercultural communication can be made and educational interventions can be tailored to facilitate development along the continuum.”

*“The basic mechanism for internalizing (embodying) worldview is **perception**. Following Piaget, Vygotsky, and other developmentalists, children become more adaptive to their particular circumstances by elaborating perceptual categories of relevant things while leaving irrelevant things either unperceived or only vaguely categorized. For example, pasta is a relevant category for Italian kids, and many of them already know the shapes (e.g., penne or rigatoni) that go with different sauces. Pasta is not very relevant for American kids, and most of them can only use the undifferentiated category of “macaroni.” Writ large, culture provides us with a set of these kind of figure/ground distinctions that allow us to co-construct with our compatriots the unique adaptive processes of our group.... As a result, otherness exists in a broad and vaguely defined perceptual category, like macaroni for pasta. Such a perceptual condition is inadequate for communicating effectively with cultural outsiders, since it lumps together people of different cultures inappropriately and precludes taking their unique perspectives in any meaningful way.”*

Milton Bennett, “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity,” *International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*

In 2004, Bennett explained his rationale for developing the model: “After years of observing all kinds of people dealing (or not) with cross-cultural situations, I decided to try to make sense of what was happening to them. I wanted to explain why some people seemed to get a lot better at communicating across cultural boundaries while other people didn’t improve at all, and I thought that if I were able to explain why this happened, trainers and educators could do a better job of preparing people for cross-cultural encounters.” In part due to Bennett’s emphasis on the educational applications of the continuum, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity has been being widely used and adapted by practitioners working in fields as varied as parent and youth engagement, deliberative dialogue, racial equity, and organizational diversity.

## The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity describes six developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity and communication, beginning with *denial* (the perception that one’s cultural perspective is the only real, accurate, or valid interpretation of reality) and culminating with *integration* (the internalization of multicultural awareness and the ability to interact productively across cultural differences).

It is important to note that the stages of intercultural sensitivity described in the model apply to individuals, groups, and organizations (although, as Bennett has noted, different approaches to evaluating or measuring developmental progress are required for different applications).



Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, sometimes called the “Bennett Scale,” describes the standard ways in which people experience, interpret, and interact across cultural differences. Presented as a developmental continuum that progresses from *ethnocentric* (denial, defensiveness, and minimization) to *ethnorelative* worldviews (acceptance, adaptation, and integration), the model has been widely used as an educational tool to help people progress toward a

deeper understanding of cross-cultural difference. Source: Intercultural Development Research Institute.

The continuum describes two distinct orientations toward cultural difference: *ethnocentrism* and *ethnorelativism*. In 2004, Bennett explained the development of the terms:

“As people became more interculturally competent it seemed that there was a major change in the quality of their experience, which I called the move from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*. I used the term ‘ethnocentrism’ to refer to the experience of one’s own culture as ‘central to reality.’ By this I mean that the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned; they are experienced as ‘just the way things are.’ I coined the term ‘ethnorelativism’ to mean the opposite of ethnocentrism—the experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities.... In general, the more ethnocentric orientations can be seen as ways of *avoiding cultural difference*, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance. The more ethnorelative worldviews are ways of *seeking cultural difference*, either by accepting its importance, by adapting perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity.”

The six developmental stages of intercultural communication and sensitivity:

## **1. Denial**

*Denial of cultural difference* occurs when people fail to recognize distinctions among cultures or consider them to be irrelevant; when they reject the claim that cultural differences exist or that they can be meaningful and consequential; or when they perceive people from different cultures in simplistic, undifferentiated, and often self-serving ways. For example, people in the denial stage will lump other cultures into vague homogenized categories, such as “foreigner,” “immigrant,” or “Asian,” or they will stereotype, demean, or dehumanize others by assuming that different cultural dispositions must be the result of deficiencies in character, intelligence, physical ability, work ethic, or other innate traits.

Denial may also manifest as a disinterest in or avoidance of other cultures, or in naive statements such as “Do they have toilets in Africa?” In educational settings, the denial stage may manifest in statements such as “Those families just don’t value education” or “If they really cared about their children they would show up to more school events.” In many cases, people at the denial stage are not intentionally trying to denigrate other cultures or groups, but their naiveté may nevertheless be hurtful to others or incline them to support unjust policies. They perceive others as less complex than themselves, and thus they experience them as less human.

## 2. Defense

*Defense against cultural difference* occurs when people perceive other cultures in polarized, competitive, zero-sum, or us-against-them terms (e.g., immigrants are taking our jobs, our traditional values are under assault, etc.); when they exalt their own culture over the culture of others (e.g., white nationalism); or when they feel victimized or attacked in discussions about bias, bigotry, or racism (e.g., they withdraw, leave the room, break down in tears, become defensive or hostile, etc.). Defense may also manifest in efforts to deny people from other cultures equal access or opportunity, such as opposition to affirmative-action policies or diversity-hiring initiatives.

In educational settings, the defense stage may manifest as parent protests or community opposition campaigns against racial integration, out-of-district busing, equitable school funding, or detracking (the elimination of academic tracks such as standard, college prep, and honors), or as the expressed fear that greater racial diversity in the student population will inevitably lead to more in-school behavioral problems, drug abuse, and violence.

## 3. Minimization

*Minimization of cultural difference* occurs when people assume that their distinct cultural worldview is shared by others, when they perceive their culture's values as fundamental or universal human values that apply to everyone, or when people obscure, disregard, or neglect the importance of cultural differences (e.g., such as when organizational leaders respond—when confronted with examples of racial, ethnic, or gender bias in the workplace—with statements such as “We try to treat everyone equally” or “I don’t see color”). Minimization may also manifest in arguments that human similarities are more important than cultural differences (thereby implying that cultural differences are unimportant or that they can be ignored), or in claims that “deep down humans are all alike.”

By reframing cultural differences in terms of human sameness, minimization enables people to avoid recognizing their own cultural biases, avoid the effort it would take to learn about other cultures, or avoid undertaking the difficult personal adaptations required to relate to or communicate more respectfully across cultural differences. (The slogan “All Lives Matter,” an antagonistic response to the Black Lives Matter movement, is a quintessential example of minimization.)

In educational settings, examples of the minimization stage might include administrators discouraging black students from forming a black-student group by encouraging them to join an existing student group instead, or responding to incidents of racial bias and bullying among students by discussing the need for “respect” while avoiding direct discussions of racism. Another example would be the so-called “food, flags, and fun” approach to diversity or multicultural education wherein educators celebrate superficial aspects of cultures, but avoid uncomfortable discussions about cultural differences or

prejudice.

#### **4. Acceptance**

*Acceptance of cultural difference* occurs when people recognize that different beliefs and values are shaped by culture, that different patterns of behavior exist among cultures, and that other cultures have legitimate and worthwhile perspectives that should be respected and valued. The acceptance stage may also manifest as greater curiosity about or interest in other cultures, and people may start to seek out cross-cultural relationships and social interactions that they might have avoided in the past.

In educational settings, acceptance may manifest in changes to the curriculum, such as teaching students about non-white historical figures or having them reading multicultural literature (rather than literature selected exclusively from the Western canon), or in programs such as LGBTQ+ student organizations that allow students to organize or educate their peers across cultural difference.

Importantly, Bennett notes that acceptance does not require that one prefer, agree with, or endorse the behaviors or values of other cultures; it means that one recognizes and accepts the fact that different cultural worldviews exist, that those worldviews shape human values, beliefs, and behaviors, and that one's own values, beliefs, and behaviors are in some measure culturally derived and determined.

#### **5. Adaptation**

*Adaptation to cultural difference* occurs when people are able to adopt the perspective of another culture, when they can empathize intellectually and emotionally with the experiences of others, or when they can interact in relaxed, authentic, and appropriate ways with people from different cultures.

The adaptation stage may also manifest when people from different cultural backgrounds can discuss their cultural experiences and perspectives in ways that are conversant in and sensitive to the other culture (Bennett has described this process as “mutual adaptation”), or when organizations embrace inclusive policies and practices that create conditions for respectful and productive cross-cultural interaction and teamwork among employees.

Importantly, Bennett stresses that adaptation is not “assimilation,” which can be defined as the process of abandoning one's cultural identity to adopt a different cultural identity (most commonly the identity of the dominant culture). In fact, Bennett has written that “adaptation offers an alternative to

assimilation. Adaptation involves the extension of your repertoire of beliefs and behavior, not a substitution of one set for another. So you don't need to lose your primary cultural identity to operate effectively in a different cultural context."

## 6. Integration

*Integration of cultural difference* occurs when someone's identity or sense of self evolves to incorporate the values, beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors of other cultures in appropriate and authentic ways. As Bennett explains, "Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.... people are able to experience themselves as multicultural beings who are constantly choosing the most appropriate cultural context for their behavior."

The integration stage occurs most commonly among members of non-dominant groups that are living in dominant-group communities, expatriates who live for long periods of time in other countries, and so-called "global nomads" who spend their lives traveling and living in far-flung parts of the world.

In educational settings, integration is most likely to occur in schools that serve culturally diverse students and families, that are staffed with adults whose demographics mirror the diversity of the student and family population, and that teach a multicultural, and possibly even multilingual, curriculum that explicitly represents and integrates the varied cultural experiences and backgrounds of the community.

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## Related Concepts

In his larger body of work, Bennett also describes and documents other phenomena that are important to understand how the developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity play out in social contexts, including the following two concepts:

### Retreat

In most cases, the developmental progression of intercultural sensitivity is a one-way phenomenon: as people adopt increasingly ethnorelative perspectives, they rarely fall back into ethnocentrism. However, Bennett describes a process he calls "retreat," which occurs when people move from a

higher ethnocentric stage to an earlier stage—most commonly from *minimization* to *defense*.

Retreat functions as a kind of “threat response”: when people are confronted with cultural difference, or when they feel criticized or judged for their cultural views, a common reaction is to get defensive or lash out. In predominantly white organizations, for example, the culture and policies of the organization, and the behaviors and comments of the white staff, may function in ways that minimize, or that are openly hostile to, the perspectives of people of color. When people of color then speak out about instances of bias in these settings, organizational leaders may deny that biased behavior exists or they may retaliate against those who spoke out with intimidation, harassment, promotion denials, or firing. In developmental terms, retreat from *minimization* to *defense* commonly happens when individuals and groups struggle to accommodate different cultural ideas or expectations because insufficient *acceptance* has been established.

## Reversal

“Reversal” or “defense reversal” occurs when people adopt the view that other cultures are superior to their own culture, such as when members of the dominant culture denigrate their own culture in the effort to secure approval, acceptance, or praise from minority groups. In *Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, Bennett offers the following useful description:

“Reversal may masquerade as cultural sensitivity, since it provides a positive experience of a different culture along with seemingly analytical criticisms of one’s own culture. However, the positive experience of the other culture is at an unsophisticated stereotypical level, and the criticism of one’s own culture is usually an internalization of others’ negative stereotypes.”

“Reversal in domestic multicultural relations is an interesting and complicated phenomenon. It appears that some people of the dominant culture take on the cause of non-dominant cultures in stereotypical ways. For instance, in the U.S. a white person of European American ethnicity may become a rabid proponent of African American issues. While it is not necessarily ethnocentric for someone to identify with the plight of historically oppressed people, in this hypothetical case the European American person sees all black people as saintly martyrs and all white people (including herself before the conversion) as brutal oppressors. By changing the poles of the polarized worldview, this person has not changed her essentially unsophisticated experience of cultural difference.”

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## Acknowledgments

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## References

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** Additional reading about the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity can be found on the [Intercultural Development Research Institute website](#).

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