Assessing Intercultural Sensitivity in Mission Candidates and Personnel

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In more than 20 years of cross-cultural ministry I have come across numerous workers with years of experience who are sensitive with members of other cultures, understanding of cultural nuances, and respected by national friends and colleagues. I have likewise come across another whole group of missionary colleagues – with the same years of experience – who are insensitive to people in their culture of ministry, lack cultural knowledge and are barely tolerated by national friends and colleagues. I have worked in a large international para-church mission body and a smaller denominational mission program and seen the same phenomenon in both groups.

Why is it that one person, with 15 years of cross-cultural experience, can be so much more inter-culturally sensitive than another person with the same amount of experience? And, I am beginning to identify new ministry candidates who are already interculturally sensitive - with very little “international” experience - that I would be happy to place directly into a cross-cultural ministry context. They have already had enough appropriate adjustment to difference in their own life context that it won’t take much for them to settle into an “international” assignment.

Some have suggested that “cultural sensitivity” or “the missionary calling” is a spiritual gift – that it is God-given and therefore not much we can do about it. On the surface that looks plausible, some have “got it” and some don’t. The rest of us just plod along doing the best we can with duty and good intentions.

Granted, intercultural sensitivity does not come naturally. We are all predisposed to function best within our own cultural frameworks. Our sense of identity is founded in the cultural context in which we were raised and socialized. As Christians, however, we have entered into a new community of identification – the body of Christ. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf suggests that we need to become distanced from the heart of own cultures, living with a marginalized identity as kingdom people. And in this kingdom we find many people with cultural identities rooted in other worldviews.

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How, then, do we develop sensitivity to these other frames of reference? And, is there a way to assess intercultural sensitivity? Can we help new, or even more experienced, missionaries to develop such sensitivity?

**Criterion-based Models**

The Canadian Foreign Service Institute has developed a set of competencies to identify Interculturally Effective Persons (IEPs):

- **Adaptation Skills**: IEPs have the ability to cope personally, professionally and in their family context with the conditions and challenges of living and working in another culture.
- **An Attitude of modesty and respect**: IEPs demonstrate modesty about their own culture’s answer to problems and a respect for the ways of the local culture, are humble about their knowledge of the local context, and are therefore willing to learn much and consult with locals before coming to conclusions on issues.
- **An Understanding of the concept of culture**: IEPs have an understanding of the concept of culture and the pervasive influence it will have on their life and work abroad.
- **Knowledge of the host country and culture**: IEPs possess knowledge of the host country and culture and try constantly to expand that knowledge.
- **Relationship-building**: IEPs possess good relationship-building skills, both social/personal and professional.
- **Self knowledge**: IEPs have knowledge of one’s own background, motivations, strengths and weaknesses.
- **Intercultural communication**: IEPs are effective intercultural communicators.
- **Organizational skills**: IEPs strive to improve the quality of organizational structures, processes and staff morale and promote a positive atmosphere in the workplace.
- **Personal and professional commitment**: IEPs have a high level of personal and professional commitment to the assignment and the life experience in another culture.²

While agreeing that this is a suitable list of the qualities we would like to see in missionaries, the list doesn’t inform us of the process or the context for developing these qualities, nor are there suggestions for evaluating these competencies. When screening new missionary candidates, or evaluating professional competency in active missionaries, this criterion-based method of assessment has limited effectiveness. It does not help us understand how they got to this position or where they need to go for further development. In fact, it’s almost a wish-list for the ideal missionary. And all of us are somewhere short of the ideal! But we may be moving in the right direction.

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² Thomas Vulpe, Daniel Kealey, David Protheroe and Doug MacDonald. *A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person*. Ottawa: Centre for Intercultural Learning, Canadian Foreign Service Institute, 2000.
How, then, do we move from being enculturated into, and identified with, one set of cultural values, to being accepting of, and adaptable to, another set of cultural values?

A Developmental Model

Intercultural communications professor Milton Bennett has developed a model and assessment tool (1977, 1986, 1993, 2004) that I think is particularly helpful. In his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Bennett describes movement across a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. By ethnocentrism he is referring to the experience of viewing one’s own culture as “central to reality.” Beliefs, values and behaviours acquired through our primary socialization are seen as adequate descriptors of “the way things are.” By ethnorelativism Bennett is referring to the experience of viewing one’s own culture as just one organization of reality amongst many legitimate possibilities. In using the suffix “relativism” Bennett is not referring to moral relativism, but specifically to the notion that differing cultural perspectives should not be seen as superior to one another, but as relative. “That ethnic group’s expression of its beliefs and behaviours is just as legitimate as mine.”

Bennett identified six distinct types of experience across the continuum from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration. A typical mono-cultural upbringing will normally result in a Denial of cultural difference. This is the situation where one’s own cultural perspective is viewed as the only real one. Other cultures are either not noticed at all, or they are understood in a rather vague manner. Defense against cultural difference is where one’s own culture is viewed as the best or the “most evolved” form of civilization. Culture difference is noticed but the world has become organized into “us and them,” where one’s own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior. A modification of this polarized situation is referred to as Reversal, in which the individual has a negative view of their own culture and regards other cultures as better than their own. This perspective may be shaped by an idyllic, short experience in another culture, or a profoundly pessimistic view of one’s own culture.

The person in denial can’t see any other place to eat except McDonalds or A & W. Defense would say “I’ve eaten at that Thai restaurant, but you won’t catch me there again – what do they put in their food?” Reversal says, “Thai food is fantastic, why would you ever eat at McDonalds – do you know what they put in their food?”

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Minimization of cultural difference is the state in which elements of one’s own culture are experienced as universal – applying to all. Cultural differences are subordinated to the overwhelming similarity between peoples and cultures; “we’re all basically alike.” Minimization is a kind of transition zone between Denial/Defense and Acceptance/Adaptation, where one’s own cultural patterns are seen as central to an assumed universal reality. The main issue to be resolved in the move forward to ethnorelativism is cultural self-awareness – the ability to experience one’s own culture as a particular context, not the central reality.

The person in minimization regards her Greek neighbour as different, but “nice”. “They have good kids, they take care of their lawn and their house is always neat; I don’t see any real differences, we’re all human beings.” In the general population, Bennett suggests, minimization is the most common stage of intercultural development.

Acceptance of cultural difference is present when one’s own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. People in acceptance are self-reflective on their experience of other cultures and are able to acknowledge others as different from themselves, but equally human. They are not necessarily experts in one or more cultures but rather they are able to identify how cultural differences in general operate in a wide range of human interactions. Note that knowledge about, and attitudes toward, other cultures are not the same thing as acceptance.

“Yes, I know I have a lot in common with my Egyptian neighbours, but there are some very profound differences as well. I don’t always understand their viewpoint, but I certainly respect their right to hold that perspective. I don’t want to impose my way of seeing the world on them; in fact, I think it is helpful to see issues from their point of view – it enriches me.”

Adaptation to cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behaviours appropriate to that culture. This shift is a change in the organization of lived experience, which includes affect and behaviours. People at adaptation are able to express their alternative cultural experience in culturally appropriate feelings and behaviours. Adaptation is not assimilation. Adaptation involves the ability to extend your range of beliefs and behaviours, not to substitute one set for another. This stage is typified by the ability to shift cognitive and behavioural frameworks from one context to the next. Adaptation is usually not achieved without at least 3 years experience in another culture.
The person who is experiencing the adaptation stage will frequently shift both their frame of reference and their behaviours so as to think and act from the perspective of the culture they live amongst. This shifting is done with authenticity and is perceived as such by persons of other cultures.

The final stage in Bennett’s model is integration, in which one’s experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. Here, people are dealing with issues related to their own “cultural marginality”; they view their identities at the margins of two or more cultures, and central to none. Entry into this stage is often accompanied by a sense of disorientation and alienation: “I feel like I don’t belong anywhere.” With positive encouragement through support from others of like orientation, a constructive marginality results in Peter Berger’s “multicultural man.” Integration is not necessarily better than Adaptation, but it reflects a growing number of people, including members of non-dominant cultures functioning within the bounds of a dominant culture, long-term expatriates, and “global nomads.”

The development of intercultural sensitivity, the way through ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, is via the increasing capacity to perceive difference. This capacity is built upon actual experience combined with reflection on that experience. Cultural knowledge is not the same thing as intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural development requires increasing experience of difference coupled with reflection and integration of insights. In the words of George Kelly:

> A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them..., he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life.  

**Making Use of a Developmental Model**

So what does this model do for the practice of missionary life and ministry?

1. It provides a developmental model rather than a criterion model.

Intercultural sensitivity is not acquired naturally, it requires stepping outside of our established ways of experiencing the world. Individuals move through stages, acquiring more complexity and nuance in their experience of cultural difference. The criterion-based model leads one to expect a fully-formed product, possessing a body of knowledge,

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4 Bennett, p.72.
and capable of performing certain assignments. A developmental model indicates what a person has already experienced and learned, where a person is at today, and where they can reasonably hope to move in the future. Missionary candidates come to us with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. We do a disservice to these candidates when we send them into ministry settings for which they are not prepared developmentally just because they have participated in certain experiences, training opportunities or orientation programs. This may be a significant factor in attrition rates.

2. It provides an objective assessment tool for identifying a person’s stage of development

When interviewing potential missionary candidates it is often difficult to get a clear picture of how the individual’s background and experience will support their future cross-cultural ministry. Two years of cross-cultural exposure is not a guarantee that intercultural sensitivity has been acquired. Criterion-based self-evaluation by potential candidates is often misleading. Even references tend to be given by those inclined to be favourable to the candidate. Tools like the Performance Appraisal System (PAS) are essentially a self-evaluation that is graded by evaluators on the basis of their intuition: “according to our experience, someone with this kind of background and self-description will do well in this ministry.” This tool also distinguishes between the respondent’s perception of their intercultural sensitivity and their experiential reality. Both are useful measures, as one suggests the desire, or intention, of the individual, while the other indicates the beginning point for further development. I have found the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to be useful in providing an objective assessment of new missionary candidates regarding their intercultural sensitivity.

3. It provides an indication of the way forward to greater intercultural sensitivity

In numerous post-assessment conversations with missionary candidates, I have never found a person who rejects their placement on the DMIS continuum, even if seemingly unfavourable. The developmental model always allows for forward movement. “If you are located in Defence, here are some steps forward, if you want to do this work.” More experience, more reflection, more reorganization of one’s worldview, will inevitably lead to greater intercultural sensitivity. The self-awareness that this tool provides is a substantial catalyst.

4. It enables appropriate activities and assignments for developing intercultural sensitivity

One of my greatest challenges in working with potential missionary candidates is discerning how to help people move forward in their desire to become effective cross-cultural workers. By identifying clearly where an individual or a team is placed in their experience of cultural difference, various learning and growth opportunities, including knowledge acquisition and experiential engagement, can be directed in a more focused manner when the mentor/trainer is aware of the learner’s developmental stage. For instance, the oft-used cross-cultural simulation exercise “Mungane Game” (or whatever
name your version uses) is particularly useful for persons moving through the Acceptance stage, but may have a negative impact upon people in the Defense stage.

Let me be clear, this tool should not be used for deciding whether to appoint – or not – a missionary candidate; it gives a reference point for forward movement. I use this tool with potential missionary candidates long after relationship and process have been initiated. We can normally assume that people who actually apply for cross-cultural ministry are past the Denial and Defense stages on the continuum. These would be persons considered not appropriate for cross-cultural ministry, at this time. This tool is most appropriately used after application papers and references have been assessed, along with intermediate activities like mental and physical health screening. But long before orientation programs and departure dates. The IDI can help prescribe further intercultural experience or formal coursework such as Intercultural Communications and Cultural Anthropology, before an individual is formally accepted and assigned to a ministry situation. Or, the tool can suggest that movement directly into a cross-cultural context would be very suitable.

We would all like to see competent cross-cultural ministry personnel. Acquiring competency in intercultural dialogue is a necessary factor in both retaining mission personnel and communicating the gospel effectively across cultures.\textsuperscript{7} Bennett asserts that often people holding religious values hang onto \textit{transcendent universalism} – the belief that certain absolutes are universal – a form of ethnocentric minimization.\textsuperscript{8} Just as democracy cannot be regarded as a universal absolute, nor even the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so culturally-biased religious values that Western Evangelicals hold will need to be relinquished. Relinquished in favour of authentic incarnation, and \textit{acceptance} that the gospel will take another shape when Jesus takes root in another cultural frame.

A tool that can identify where mission candidates and present personnel are in their experience of cultural difference would be extremely helpful to me as a developer of missionaries. The Intercultural Development Inventory provides me with such a tool.

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\textsuperscript{7} I have written more extensively on the characteristics required of Christian leaders functioning in multi-ethnic settings and the developmental learning process in \textbf{The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality}, Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2005.

\textsuperscript{8} Bennett, p.67.
Bibliography


Vulpe, Thomas, and Daniel Kealey, David Protheroe and Doug MacDonald. *A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person*. Ottawa: Centre for Intercultural Learning, Canadian Foreign Service Institute, 2000.