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## **Benchmarking Intercultural Training: Understanding the Effects of Exposure to Cultural Difference**

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**Many companies have now firmly installed pre-departure training for staff members about to work in a foreign culture. Country-specific briefings, information about culture shock, and analytical models of cultural differences may be part of those trainings.**

In times of tight budgets, however, one might wish to understand more precisely what the expatriate needs to learn, and what training can do. He or she certainly has to acquire a good deal of knowledge about the host culture, its political and economic situation, its history and institutions, its business customs and codes of conduct. In most cases, the cultural differences between home and host culture will also make it necessary to practice a number of new behaviours – from the notorious skills of business card exchanges to the more intricate competences required to perform face-threatening actions like giving feedback, instructing staff and asking for help. Up-to-date pre-departure training can help a lot in

these areas, and provided expatriates are on the lookout for cultural differences, they will have ample opportunity to complement their knowledge and behavioural skills basis once they start living and working in the host culture.

There is, however, one area of intercultural readiness that may not as easily improve, and this concerns the expatriates' attitudes towards other cultures. While success in a foreign culture is certainly related to knowledge and practical skills, it also depends on the expatriates' **attitudes** towards culturally different others: Their attitude will influence how they evaluate and use their newly acquired knowledge and skills, and

whether they will deepen their understanding of the host culture after arrival. In the following we present evidence that one type of attitude towards cultural difference is particularly resistant to change and may require highly individualized training.

The evidence comes from an analysis of a database that IBI has established in the process of using the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (© Hammer & Bennett, 1998). Contact IBI Licensee of the Intercultural Development Inventory at [ibinet@wxs.nl](mailto:ibinet@wxs.nl)

### **The Intercultural Development Inventory**

Mitchell Hammer and Milton Bennett (1998) developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a tool to assess intercultural sensitivity. According to Bennett (1993), intercultural sensitivity develops in a characteristic fashion, covering a sequence of 6 stages. The first three stages reflect ethnocentric attitudes towards cultural difference, the last three stages reflect ethnorelative attitudes (Hammer & Bennett, 1998). The six IDI stages can be summarised as follows:

Ethnocentric stages:

1. Denial: Inability or unwillingness to construe cultural differences
2. Defense: Recognition and mainly negative evaluation of differences
3. Minimisation: Recognition and acceptance of superficial differences.

Ethnorelative stages:

4. Acceptance: Appreciation of difference in behaviour and values
5. Cognitive Adaptation: Ability to intentionally shift one's frame of reference, and to adequately evaluate behaviour in terms of the contexts in which it is shown
6. Behavioural Adaptation: Ability to link behavior to shifts in cultural perception, and to allow behavior to emerge from the shift in perspective.

The IDI consists of 60 items, with 10 items assessing a given stage. Respondents are asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the degree to which they agree with each item. Ideally, the stage with the highest score indicates their current stage of intercultural sensitivity but often their entire profile will be taken into account.

#### **Development of intercultural sensitivity: Does experience alone suffice?**

Over a period of two years, IBI consultant Ursula Brinkmann distributed the IDI to a total of 424 respondents from various countries, 139 of them women and 285 men. Table 1 shows some additional characteristics of our sample:



Age	Percent of respondents	Education	Percent of respondents	International experience	Percent of respondents
22-30	23	Not completed High School	1	None	21
31-40	47	High School grade	9	< 3 months	16
41-50	22	M.A. degree	61	3-6 months	10
51-60	7	Ph.D. degree	18	7-11 months	6
60+	1	Other	11	1-2 years	14
				3-5 years	13
				6-10 years	9
				> 10 years	11

First, we looked at the effect of age on the results. Age only affected the scores for Denial, such that older respondents in our sample tend to have higher scores than younger respondents. Secondly, we tested whether level of education would affect IDI scores. Consistent with the findings of Hammer and Bennett (1998), we found no effect.

In contrast to age and level of education, international experience did correlate with IDI results: People with more international experience are less likely to deny and minimise cultural differences than people with less international experience. They are also more likely to accept cultural differences, and to adapt to them both cognitively and behaviourally. Overall then, people do become more interculturally sensitive by spending more time abroad. Further research – for example, about the pattern of development over time – is needed to determine more closely the direction of influence between international experience and intercultural sensitivity.

One aspect of intercultural sensitivity, however, seems unaffected by international experience, i.e., the attitude of **Defense**: No correlation was found between amount of international experience and defensive responses to cultural differences. Apparently, experience alone does not help people to overcome their defensive attitude, even though it does help them overcome Denial and Minimisation. This suggests that Defense may deserve special attention from trainers and HR managers involved in expatriation.

Recall that Defense is the stage at which people do acknowledge the existence of cultural differences but feel predominantly threatened by them. According to the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, this sense of threat invites people to evaluate culturally different others negatively, and to positively evaluate people from their own cultural group. Our results show that scores in Defense are unrelated to amount of international experience: Expatriates high in Defense are thus likely



to remain defensive regardless of how much time they spend in the host culture. How can we explain this finding, and what can we learn from it in order to help people overcome their defensive attitude?

We will discuss two approaches, one drawing on research on stereotypes and one drawing on arguments from personality research. We will then discuss some implications of each approach for intercultural training.

### **Research on stereotypes**

Research on stereotypes shows that stereotypes are ideal mental tools to develop, maintain and justify an attitude of Defense (for an overview of research on stereotyping, see Macrae, Stangor & Hewstone, 1996):

- 1) The world is perceived in terms of *us* vs. *them*, with *us* being good and *them* being bad.
- 2) Group membership therefore becomes a salient feature for explaining why people behave the way they do.

Group membership becomes salient for generalising initial observations across all members of a given group.

Stereotypes are notorious for their stickiness – once you have acquired one, you will have a hard time letting go of it. This is because stereotypes allow you to play around with the relevant evidence. Group members who do not fit the stereotype may be simply ignored, or else considered irrelevant exceptions.

Stereotypes explain why Defense is immune to new evidence. Since we cannot apparently rely on simple exposure to other cultures for diminishing Defense, intercultural trainers must carefully address the nature and inherent logic of stereotypes. They need to assess whether expatriates already are defensive, and if so, should focus first on similarities rather than differences between home and host culture (see also Bennett & Bennett, 1998; Hammer & Bennett, 1998). Intense discussion of models of cultural difference as suggested by Hofstede (1980/2001) and Trompenaars (1993) may be counter-productive at this stage: Instead of deepening the expatriates' understanding of cultural difference, these models may only feed their stereotypes. Also, training activities need to be selected with care.

Confrontational activities like Bafa Bafa may be too challenging for participants about to move to another culture, who may therefore cling to their defensive attitudes rather than develop new behaviours (see again Bennett & Bennett, 1998, as well as Castelan Cargile & Giles, 1995).

### **Defense and Personality**

According to Hammer and Bennett, Defense is a developmental stage, which suggests that we are all equally likely to enter this stage and eventually move on. We have recently started a research project to find out whether this is the case.



The idea for this project comes from perspectives on defense mechanisms in research on personality (see for example, Cramer & Davidson, 1998). Here, defense is related to relatively stable personality traits like Neuroticism and Emotional Instability, rather than to stages in a developmental process. Defense mechanisms serve to reduce the threat that people experience in certain situations. Emotionally unstable persons feel more easily threatened by events happening around them, and are more motivated to avoid potentially negative experiences than emotionally stable individuals. Researchers have therefore argued that neurotic or emotionally instable individuals are more likely to establish and maintain defensive attitudes (here understood in the more general sense of defensive attitudes towards potentially threatening experiences and events).

In our research project, we will combine the IDI with the Multicultural Personality Inventory (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000; © van Oudenhoven & van der Zee). The MPI is a personality assessment tool specifically developed for expatriate assessment and support and assesses, among other aspects, Emotional Stability.

A correlation between Defense as assessed by the IDI and Emotional Stability would imply that Defense is not just a developmental stage but is a more complex phenomenon,

consisting of stable and developmental aspects. Such a finding would call for the need to better understand how different individuals respond to cross cultural encounters, and how intercultural training can help different people develop constructive attitudes towards other cultures. It would also suggest adapting expatriate training, such that support for defensive people to manage their emotional instability is provided – for example, by helping them, their partner and/or family to cope with the stress they will experience prior to departure, and upon arrival in the host culture. Some candidates may even decide against a suggested assignment if they are allowed to take into account their responses to intercultural stress as an emotional challenge - and others may realise that this is the challenge they were waiting for.

**If you wish to be informed about the results of our research, please contact IBI at [ibinet@wxs.nl](mailto:ibinet@wxs.nl).**

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