

Milton Bennett talks about the DMIS

An interview with one of the most innovative thinkers in the intercultural world



The Old and New Worlds are in a continual battle as to which best faces the challenges of life. Europeans lead with their culture--a civilisation built on 2500 years of art, science and philosophy--and exhibit greater sophistication and a more intellectual understanding of human nature. Americans answer with the brash confidence that comes of youthful success: a can-do attitude based on impatience with the past and an eternally-optimistic view of the future.

The most fascinating aspect of this clash of Titans is their synergy. George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* shocked many in the straight-laced confines of symphonic music when it premiered in 1924 but it awed many more, with a million records sold by 1927. The composer called it "a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep [and] metropolitan madness." What was left unstated, because taken for granted, was that the piece was built on the European foundations of the classical form...

The same can be said of Milton Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS), a ground-breaking study of how the mind adapts to cultural difference. Combining American vitality and pragmatism with European constructivism and cognitive psychology, he analyzed our intercultural reactions according to a continuum which opposes ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism.

Bennett observed that individuals from distinct societies react in predictable ways when learning to communicate with each other. As one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex, one's potential for exercising competence in relations increases. His model comes closer than anyone's in describing the subtlety of the human brain and his work clearly demonstrates that subjective relativity is essential to getting along in our global world.

Milton Bennett is both a gifted researcher and an award-winning communicator. A Portland State University professor for 15 years, he launched their graduate program in Intercultural Communication and also co-founded the *The Intercultural Communication Institute* (ICI). He currently holds an adjunct faculty position at the University of Milano Bicocca and is a founding director of the *Intercultural Development Research Institute*, located in Milan, Italy and Portland, Oregon.

Eager to know more about the experiences that brought about his DMIS, I visited Dr. Bennett in Milan, where he now spends a good part of his time.

Let's start with your early life-experiences...

Soon after I was born in Boston, my parents moved to Seattle, where I spent my first eight years. After that we lived a couple of years in Stockton, California. All I can remember about Stockton

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It was during his studies at Stanford that Milton Bennett became fascinated with the phenomenon of creativity.



was that it was flat and I was able to ride my bicycle. From the age of ten, I lived in a small town outside Portland, Oregon. The schools in McMinnville provided a better education than I would have experienced in a big city. And there was a small liberal arts college, which had a large number of foreign students.

So more diversity than a normal small town?

Yes, but I was used to differences. When we lived in Seattle, my mother used to take me to other places in the city that were not so homogenous as where we lived, just to give me the experience of being around people who were different.

Another thing my parents did was host a student sponsored by AFS (*American Field Service*). He came from Hamburg, Germany, and became a good friend. After graduating from high school, I did a three-month tour of Europe with Helmut, who really perked my interest in other cultures.

Also my father became the international marketing representative at the small company he worked for. He ended up travelling a lot to Europe and Asia and made me acutely aware of the importance of international business.

Obviously, your curiosity about cultural differences came to you early in life. Did you want to become an interculturalist from the beginning?

No, not at all. Through high school, I had two big interests--one was science and the other was writing. I participated in national science projects, was given scholarships and sent off to science camps. My studies began at Stanford University, where I majored in physics for a couple of years but realized I didn't really want to do that. I found myself moving to the other side of my interests and joined the creative writing program at Stanford.

Interesting things were happening in the mid-'60s. I got involved in research at the Palo Alto Medical Center, taking part in early experiments with LSD. At that time LSD was legal and seen as a consciousness exploration; it was taken seriously by researchers. There were a lot of safeguards and always someone there who could intercede if anything went wrong. I had some interesting experiences and wrote about them in psychology classes. What LSD does is to lower interconceptual boundaries, so there's a flowing of one thing into another. Some of the insights in my work were facilitated by those "trips".

I ended up graduating with a creative writing degree and the upshot of that was I became interested in cognitive psychology--how the mind creates. "The act of creation", to borrow the phrase from Arthur Koestler's book; writers are tuned in to that. The combination of LSD-exploration and cognitive psychology came together to provide me with

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“To borrow the phrase from Arthur Koestler’s book ‘The Act of Creation’ is in itself a really interesting event of consciousness.”



motivation to explain this interesting act of consciousness. How does it work? Why would it work that way?

I decided to do a masters degree in psycho-linguistics at San Francisco State University. I thought this would be interesting to explore the psychology of language as a way of understanding the act of creation and consciousness in general. It was a combination of general semantics, more or less based on linguistic relativity; the Whorf/Sapir Hypothesis was central to this movement. The basic idea of general semantics—which has been largely lost—is that many problems in the way we think about things have to do with the “reification” of language. [Editor’s note: *The fallacy of treating an abstraction as if it were a real thing.*]

Misapprehensions are related to that. For instance, some say the most dangerous word in the English language is ‘is’, because it’s taken as a statement of reality rather than as a linguistic convention to create a representation of something.

So you wanted to know how linguistics, in the context of creative writing, affects our representation of ourselves and others.

You could say so. And I shifted to the meta level, seeing myself as somebody interested in explaining things, being

creative in the explanation of description rather than a generator of artistic creativity. I did the course-work, which was very interesting, then joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to Micronesia.

What was the Peace Corps like at that time?

The Peace Corps was in transition, moving from pre-departure to on-site training. The pre-departure consisted of exposing us to a set of grueling psychological stress tests. The idea was if the local inhabitants attacked you psychologically and you could resist, that would make you a good volunteer.

Then they dropped us on an island called Truk, now called Chuuk. They left us alone except for language classes; it was a sort of sink-or-swim immersion. The program was run by former volunteers who had no sophistication in talking about the culture—nothing about communication, values, beliefs or behavior. There was a little bit about etiquette, but only as a side-effect of the language.

The only thing good was the language-training; classes were excellent and we lived with a family who didn’t speak any English. This generated, in my mind, the idea of being a “fluent fool”: you know the language but nothing about the culture. In 1998 I published *“How not to be a fluent fool”* and discovered that Winston Brembach had already coined the term.

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His first long-term intercultural experience was to spend two years as a Peace Corps volunteer on the Truk island in Micronesia.



Those two years in the Peace Corps were both mind-blowing and mind-numbing. There were moments of complete boredom and, at times, tremendous change. Looking back, my major experience was learning and speaking Trukese to the point of being negotiable at some of the most complex levels of that society.

What did you do after your time with the Peace Corps?

I came back to finish writing my master's thesis. It was about empathy and sympathy. I think empathy describes the mechanism of consciousness-shifting. Empathy is intentionally setting up the condition of trying to apprehend another's experience sufficiently to feel "as if" you are having that experience yourself. This is the basis of all good communication, although people mostly think of it as a therapy technique. Empathy is particularly necessary for intercultural communication.

I was really interested in *intentional* consciousness-shifting, whether facilitated by LSD, done through meditation, or a basic act of creation such as a novelist might engage in. I believe it's an extension of boundaries, allowing yourself to move through something that's not your normal experience. The same could be said about an artistic happening, such as watching a ballet or appreciating a sculpture, you're "taken in" by aesthetic empathy.

At the same time, I was doing some interesting studies on voluntary control of internal states: bio-feedback and certain paranormal phenomena like remote-viewing, where one's perception seems to be located outside or even at a distance from one's body.

Upon finishing your thesis, you continued your studies on extending boundaries?

Yes, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. Then I got a call from Dean Barnlund, a former professor who was organizing a conference at the International Christian University at Mitaka, outside Tokyo. I said to myself, "If he thinks I should go, I'm going!" I had no money but I went out and borrowed it. As it turned out, it was a seminal conference in intercultural communication. It was in 1972 and a lot of the early intercultural people were there and many decisions were made, one being to set up SIETAR.

Then a second fateful thing happened. Our Japanese guide got drunk at dinner and the train he put us on was going in the wrong direction. I was with Bill Howell, who was setting up a doctoral program in Intercultural Communications. At the end of our long trip he said, "Why don't you come to the University of Minnesota?"

You accepted his invitation?

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“Intentional consciousness shifting is really an extension of boundaries that allows you to move through an experience that’s not your normal experience.”



Yes, to do the program as well as teach intercultural workshops; they date back to the mid-'60s in Pittsburgh and were based on Edward Hall's work targeting foreign students. Now they were being used for all kinds of students, not just foreign, to explore ethnic differences, what we call diversity today.

Did the workshops deepen your knowledge of consciousness-shifting?

Yes. But intercultural communication is not unique in supposing there's some kind of "shift" necessary to appreciate someone else's experience. In certain types of therapy the level of intensity demands a bigger act of empathy on the part of the therapist than does everyday communication. The same thing happens at artistic events. And leadership is also related to context-shifting. People at the Harvard Leadership Initiative call it "contextual intelligence", the ability to be aware of context and to shift. Intercultural communication is an *operationalization* of shifting consciousness.

Another powerful thing about the program at Minnesota was the dissertation work I did on the "forming-feeling process", an early attempt to say perception is really about apprehending the feeling of something and communication is about giving form to that. Antonio Demasio wrote a book on this, *The Feeling of What Happens*. The forming is more

the categorization, the structuring of the experience. I called this a system of "processual complementarity", meaning that these two sides were constantly being reconciled--it's a dialectic that maintains itself.

What you're saying is that intercultural competence is a more sophisticated description of the feeling?

There are two levels here, Patrick. One is of someone moving through that sequence, acquiring a more sophisticated experience of cultural difference by having more sophisticated strategies for describing, giving form to the experience.

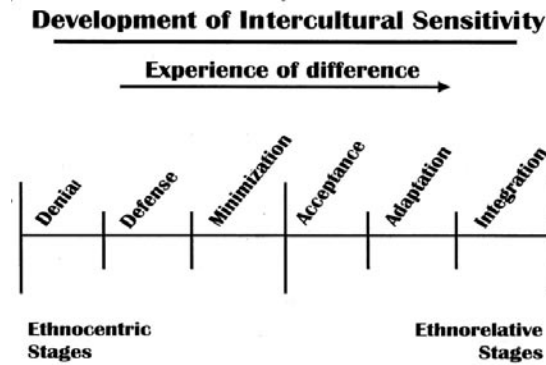
[Editor's note: *This interview took place in my hotel room but, before we could get started, we were told Dr. Bennett had to return downstairs and register. Ironically, this annoyance provided us an excellent example of "forming-feeling".*]

[When the employee came] we first reacted angrily and said to ourselves, "He's an idiot!" Then we have our cultural informant describe the context, in that hotels in Italy are now required by law to check everyone going to a room for reasons of terrorism. This is organizing that experience in a more sophisticated way. So rather than say something simplistic--"He's an idiot!"--we say, "Well this is an interesting situation." We don't necessarily prefer it but we see how this fits in to a more general cultural pattern of some sort.

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The different positions in the DMIS

The same thinking often happens at the end of my workshops. Participants say, “If we’d known this before, we’d have avoided misunderstandings with our foreign colleagues. Now we have a more coherent structure.”

Yes, what you’re doing is taking them through that process, giving them a more sophisticated way of understanding. In a lot of cases, it’s retroactive: they’ll reflect on the experience they had and say, “Now, I see what was happening.”

The other thing is on the meta level; the DMIS itself is a description of how people get better at this. All of us, carry around certain trailing tendencies and one of them is a little bit of superiority and familiarity with our own culture and a little bit of a negative response when something happens that’s different. The question is how quickly can we reconstrue the experience with more sophisticated categories?

You mean to have a more neutral, appropriate view?

Yes. Here our cultural informant says the employee was a little overzealous but not really an idiot, which allows us to reframe. How open are we? Assuming we’re further along the developmental sequence, we’re looking for resolutions. We’re distrustful of our gut reaction if we think it may be

ethnocentric. When he told us to register, we initially reacted in an ethnocentric manner, not as an Italian would.

However, we have to be careful in not accepting everything as cultural. In some situations the other person is an idiot [and] acting wrongly in his or her cultural context. If we’re unable to see how that person is acting inappropriately, we’re being just as insensitive as if we were ethnocentric.

To get back to my Ph.D. work, it was the theoretical extension of the master’s program, consciousness-shifting, but going into the more general theory of how perception and communication were operating in this forming-feeling process. This established the theoretical base for being able to talk about consciousness-shifting in general. I began teaching courses on consciousness and paranormal communication and did this for a number of years but I slowly began doing more and more intercultural work. I’ve never seen them being as distinct.

So you could say intercultural communication is a form of paranormal communication?

Yes, it’s paranormal in the sense that it’s not what we normally do. But it’s in the realm of human capabilities.

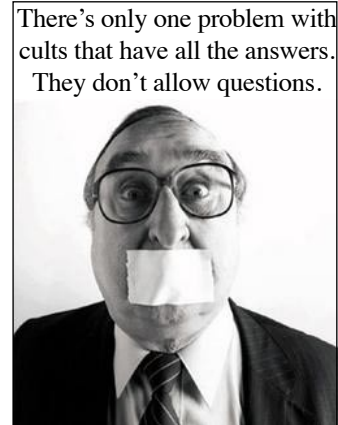
How, then, did the DMIS come into being?

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Milton Bennett has always been interested in cults, which are just "little models of ethnocentrism."



It was a combination of those two things, running intercultural workshops and doing consciousness studies. All the time my brain is organizing stuff around forming, feeling, extension, empathy--all this consciousness work I'm doing.

The original motivation for the DMIS was training-methodology. In the mid-'80s, methods were often thrown together in haphazard ways. A lot of concern was for pacing issues, like you should do simulation after lunch because it keeps people awake. There was no pedagogical sequencing or logical consideration. I wanted to answer the questions "How can we sequence this material better in training programs?" [and] "What do we hope people will be able to do at the end of this?"

This was an early attempt to define intercultural competence. I'd define the end-state as integration--the ability to shift from one state to another--whether it be bicultural or multicultural -- what I now call an expanded repertoire of worldview.

What's the beginning state? Some of my early studies at Portland were around cults: a little model of an ethnocentric culture, very strong. People who otherwise might not be ethnocentric join these groups and become ethnocentric. Those who run the Moonies and, to some extent, the

Scientologists really know which buttons to push. The caution is to recognize the process, not the nonsense being said. I defined the process cult-leaders use in generating followings and, to my surprise, it was later published in a book for FBI agents!

When it came time to define what is ethnocentric, I had a pretty good idea: the experience of your own culture as central to your reality. All of us are, to some extent, convinced about our set of beliefs...religious, national, etcetera. The cult-people think their view of reality is completely and uniquely central to reality.

So what is the beginning state? It's this experience of your own culture as being central and it moves through this forming-feeling process that I name stages--they're really more positions along the continuum than stages. What you're doing is marking different organizations of experience; the DMIS is based on subjective organization. The more complex structure you have for dealing with cultural differences, the deeper the experience you have.

How does this different organization of experience actually work?

There are two levels. My ability to understand you depends on my having a relatively complex facsimile of

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“Intercultural competence is acquiring a more sophisticated experience of cultural difference by having more sophisticated strategies for describing, meaning giving form to that experience.”



you and your experience. That said, I also need to have a relatively complex explanation for how it is that I go about apprehending that experience. So not only do I need to have the idea that you're a complex human being, but I also have to have an infrastructure that allows me to take that perspective. And both of those things are developing simultaneously in the DMIS.

In the ethnocentric condition, I have virtually no sense of the complexity of the other. I have this complete simplification of anything outside of my own experience [but] I may have a pretty complex experience of my own context.

To go back to the point, the movement through the developmental model is [that of] forming feelings, getting better at consciousness-shifting. I think that the DMIS represented a formalization, in an intercultural context, of all the work I'd been doing on consciousness from my last two years at Stanford up 'til 1986. In those 22 years, it had all come together.

So the DMIS came out of creative writing, LSD experiments, linguistics, the Peace Corps, foreign students, and paranormal and intercultural studies. There wasn't a conscious effort to say "I'm going to discover the stages people go through when adapting to other cultures."

You could say that. The impetus to write the DMIS came from workshops which asked "What do we do next?" I articulated this in Michael Paige's book *Cross-Cultural Orientation* or in a special issue of IJIR (*International Journal of Intercultural Relations*), I forget which...Both occurred pretty much at the same time in 1986 [and] the response led to the re-publication of the DMIS in a somewhat more sophisticated form in 1993. Since then, I've been refining it. It was about 2004 when I did my last major rewrite and I'll probably do another one soon.

Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt

In the second part of the interview, found at this link

www.sietareu.org/publications/newsletter

Milton talks about the issues facing the intercultural field and in the virtual world, the usefulness of the IDI and recommendations to young people going into the field.

And on the next page, you can read an interview of Milton conducted by Sietar member Patrick Boylan. There, he discusses a person's cultural identity from a "constructivist" perspective

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Cultural Identity and Integration

Milton Bennett talks to Patrick Boylan



In a recent interview for the journal Cultus, Milton Bennett discussed what makes up a person's cultural identity from a "constructivist" perspective and how this perception enables a trainer/teacher to get better results in preparing trainees/students to interact effectively with culturally diverse interlocutors. An excerpt follows below.

The interview was conducted by Patrick Boylan, vice-president of SIETAR-Italia and member of the editorial board of Cultus. The journal's web site is www.cultusjournal.com, for those interested in subscribing. For a limited time SIETAR members can download the entire interview – free of charge – at www.tinyurl.com/cultus3.

BOYLAN: So how does your constructivist view of reality differ from, say, a positivist's view?

BENNETT: If you're a positivist, you think you can grasp the reality of a client's intercultural competence or of a foreign person's cultural heritage with a simple questionnaire, and then pigeon-hole that competence or that culture using a chart or an inventory of traits. And you are convinced that your chart maps really-existing qualities, and that the traits you list have real existence.

But if you're a constructivist, you find all that illusory. Instead, you try to get to know that competence or that culture through

reconstructing it within you, by analogy with something outside you that you can only glimpse as in a dark mirror. To be more exact, you co-construct that "emerging reality" within you, by interacting with that client or that foreign partner in certain controlled ways.

This is what little children do, too. They constantly test their mother or father to see how much they can get away with. They "map" their parents' value system (the "Accepted Rules of Behavior" which even their parents may be incapable of defining precisely, at least in many borderline cases) as a constantly emerging reality that, through repeated testing, gradually takes shape within their minds – although it will never ever acquire a definitive form.

BOYLAN: So we construct reality from nothing that already exists definitively, right? And we do so through the kind and quality of interactions we have. Does this apply to our identity, too?

BENNETT: Yes. The constructivist view is that you cannot really avoid creating your own identity. The question is whether you are aware of that or not. Typically we operate in a group, we receive our socialization through a group, we maintain that pattern of behavior (which we call our culture) through interaction with people in the group, and we may – or may not – be aware that we are in the process of constructing all that. But once we become aware, then we can take charge of the process.

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