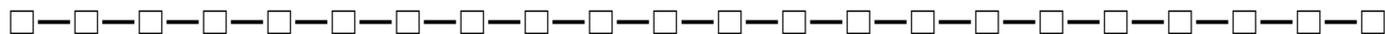


Japan Society for Multicultural Relations  
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## ***A Report on Milton J. Bennett’s Developing Contextual Consciousness: Approaching Intercultural Communication Competence with a Constructivist Paradigm***

**Ray T. Donahue, PhD (Nagoya Gakuin University)**



The Japan community of interculturalists received a rare treat in the form of a brilliant presentation on March 12 by one of the world’s leading IC scholars, Milton J. Bennett. This report about his talk makes no attempt to fully encapsulate it, but rather summarizes some essential content and offers readers sources for further information.

### **■ Overview**

Several key concepts underlie the presentation: ethnorelativism, constructivism, and contextual consciousness. His talk was a timely topic on relativism and why a major paradigm shift has been taking place toward “**ethnorelativism**.” From this term we can deduce that despite the limitation of relativism, its essential contribution of respect for other cultures is at the core. Indeed that respect for cultural-specific values is heightened along with added concern for observer consciousness—how we co-construct our reality of another culture, as Bennett explains—the process of **constructivism** (not to be confused with constructionism).<sup>1</sup> I offer this mental crutch: Whereas relativism ends ultimately in separation in the case of widely disparate cultures (“equal but separate”), ethnorelativism aspires for unity (“separate but still equal”).

Ethnorelativism seems paradoxical but Dr. Bennett’s deft treatment illustrated well, actual examples used in corporate training programs. For example, corporate executives in diversity training are asked to identify contributions made by females toward success of the company or firm. The male and female members collaboratively doing this exercise experience unity (“we are teammates,” they might say) yet while recognizing their positive differences (“we each have an important position on the team”). An advance in IC practice, which answers Bennett’s lament expressed early in his talk: IC people are great for telling people that cultural differences exist but much less so in showing how to bridge those differences. The key in doing so is “**contextual consciousness**,” on-going awareness of one’s self and others and being able to switch between these respective consciousnesses. Such is only achievable, it would appear, through an understanding and prizing of cultural differences, thus ethnorelativism as a goal.

As an audience member I was impressed by the erudition as well as by Dr. Bennett’s masterful presentation skills. His is made through a comfortable pace, leavened by humorous asides and stories, all the while reaching essential conceptual landmarks. This was not my first presentation of his, and particularly appealing I found is his apt attention to whomever asks a question or makes a comment. He of course is well known by many of us, but I would like to share something that few realize. It perhaps is one of the special, distinguishing features about him.

### **■ The Speaker**

We are aware of distinctions in academe between research universities and teaching universities, the former giving faculty more time for their research than would the latter institutions. And the latter in turn providing more time than is usually available for those outside of academe. Thus it is remarkable how Dr. Bennett, outside of academe (full time), has been so prolific publishing impactful work. He has been one of the most referenced figures in our field. I cannot emphasize the enormity of this accomplishment even without

mentioning the cutting edge research of his. Thus it was with delight that I took the bullet train from Nagoya to the capital to attend this momentous event.

So his specialness is the rarity by which he straddles both theory and practice between academics and practitioners. Indeed by his own account he told me that most of his best work was achieved after leaving a full time university position, still early in his career. In effect he comes to us as a practitioner but one at the very top of the entire field. In most professional fields a divide exists between academics and practitioners, so we should not be surprised the same for IC. JSMR, contrarily, embraces both, at least from what I have observed. Truly the best theory, the best practice comes from a unity of both. Onward together through JSMR!

Having given an overview of the event and the speaker, I should like to give a bit more detail about Dr. Bennett's talk, which by the way follows his updated book, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication* (Intercultural Press, 2013), a book the interculturalist will want to have. Space herein limits this report, so only the highlights will be touched; for further information please refer to his *Basic Concepts* book sourced below.

### ■ **Outline of the Presentation: Main Topics:**

- Introduction to JSMR
- Intercultural Consciousness
- Paradigms of Otherness
- DMIS applications
- Implementation of Keys in Japanese Contexts (Education, Business, Government, Community)
- Conclusion

**Problem.** An essential problem in the IC field is that the greater society is under the myths of the melting pot and global convergence (= a blindness to cultural difference). Whereas early 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States believed that immigrants would all converge over time into "one" (while having absorbed mainstream culture, read "WASP"), similarly today globalization (read, westernization/Americanization) is thought to eventually lead to a narrowing of cultural differences as a universal culture takes hold. (Naturally this view is from the U.S., whence came the academic field of IC.) However, it was Marshall McLuhan (1964) who saw otherwise: "In the 'global village' our neighbors will be profoundly different from ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

Media appears to illustrate well this point and quite aptly so, by media coverage of the U.S. 2016 Presidential Election, how greatly divisive politically, socially, and ethnically it became, as well as by how hi-tech devices allow anyone literally to be a "journalist" and report to the world their take on current and cultural topics (thus adding great variety and diversity). In society, cultural differences are being accented by rising levels of immigration and a backlash of nationalism. Being in the same space doesn't make people the same, as Hofstede's IBM research studies similarly show. Even in a tight corporate culture as IBM, the employees in Hofstede's studies showed more internal differences among themselves than that found within comparable groups outside of the company, an unexpected finding. The IC field has yet to fully address this phenomenon, according to Bennett.

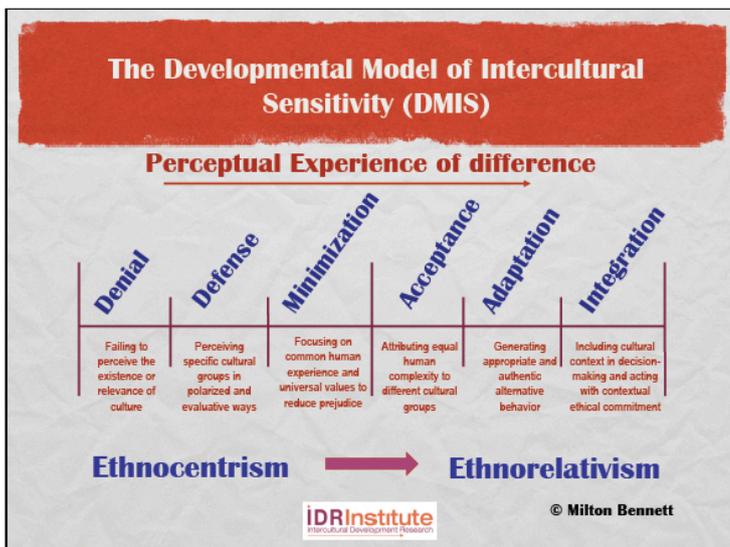
**Consciousness (Intercultural or otherwise).** The almost knee-jerk reactions of violence to immigration by some recalls **Julian Jaynes's** take on early man and the rise of consciousness, a theory acknowledged by Bennett important in his work. Early on people saw outsiders as objects in the environment and were to be literally killed. People lacked a consciousness of self and thus could not have much fellow feeling for others, let alone understanding. In crisis, people learned to rely on the "voices" (literally or figuratively) of their god(s), and in the earliest of times, these voices directed people to slay outsiders. However as humans flourished in numbers and came into increasingly more intergroup contact, it was more practical for groups to find accommodation rather than war. As humans came to distinguish themselves by "me," they could transfer their consciousness as a person to see others like themselves as well. Although humans have come a

long way in development, they still seem to be influenced by their primordial past of dimed consciousness, something of course seen in Nazi Germany. The sometimes impulse to remove outsiders or strangers persists but is even more dangerous today because of the threat of nuclear weapons (thus giving impetus to the constructivist paradigm and the importance of contextualized consciousness).

**Paradigms.** A progression was shown how a successive number of paradigms of science took root historically: Pre-Scientific, Alter-Enlightenment, Newtonian, Einsteinium, and Constructivist. Essential points for the interculturist about the latest paradigm shift to the constructivist (or quantum) are:

- 1 Reality (including ourselves) is co-created through interaction with our environment (including other people): OBSERVER/OBSERVED INTERACTION
- 2 Culture is both the collective process of constructing reality and its product: CO-ONTOGENY
- 3 The probability of events is influenced by intention and expectation. Human groups have a co-evolutionary relationship.<sup>3</sup>

**DMIS applications.** The DMIS, created by Milton J. Bennett, stands for Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, a model showing a range of developmental capacity for sensitivity (positive) toward cultural difference from denial onward to complete acceptance or integration (see the chart below).<sup>4</sup>



A key to acceptance of cultural difference is to see others in as much complexity as one sees oneself. (Consider this psychological principle: People tend to minimize the situational factors behind the behavior of others while maximizing the same in one's own favor. This mechanism, I propose, might become more pronounced in interethnic relations.) Another key, this related to adaptation, is caution must be made to avoid doing inauthentic copying of behaviors of target culture bearers. Bennett gave the example of, foreigners bowing in Japanese culture before being fully accomplished in doing so. Native culture bearers could become offended, possibly misinterpreting the foreigner's intent. As far as integration on the DMIS, it involves behaving according to local norms of behavior in everyday decision making and in other activities.

**Implementations.** The DMIS can serve a vital function in guiding work toward ethnorelativism, as its higher stages of development greatly depend on contextualized consciousness and constructivism. It is through other people and our interaction with them that inform our co-constructed reality of the world, surely dependent on how well we can switch our frames of reference or thinking from the other to ourselves. Earlier in this report, the example of diversity training, raising gender awareness by which predominantly males could be led to perceive females in less "genderized" ways, lessening, for example, the traditional idea that Japanese female office workers are there to serve tea. The male colleagues, if observant enough as

well as open-minded, might recall how females performed well taking charge of certain activities. Although this is the context of gender, I offer in a very real sense that the genders can be viewed as if from different “cultures,” considering how society treats males and females differently. Applied to workers from different cultures within the same company, one can well imagine that similar training could be done: In what special ways can workers from culture-x help our company? Such questions can lead majority-culture bearers to realize that their foreign colleagues can or do much the same as they do. Again, they cooperatively act as one (a team) while accenting the positive strengths of the minority group members (each has a position on our team); thus reconciling the heretofore paradox of melding unity and difference together, going beyond relativism toward constructivism.

## ■ Conclusion

I hope that this report gives some clarity to the always-complex subject of theory. As profound as the ideas presented, this report can but touch the surface. More than a presentation, this event also was a celebration of Bennett’s life work. His DMIS is widely appreciated in the field as well as his spearheading the movement toward constructivist thought along with his many other accomplishments. Relativism is surely one of the great contributions coming out of anthropology but has its limitations. Ethnorelativism, being promoted by Bennett, seems to fill a long-unaddressed gap in intercultural relations: It brings realism to the fore while providing remedy.

## ■ Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to the OED, these terms become interchangeable. They differ technically, however, depending on the particular field. Only as a mental crutch let me share how Mills, Birks, & Hoare (2014) see the difference: constructivism emphasizes the mind’s role in learning; whereas for constructionism, it’s social interaction. Constructivism is closely associated with Piaget, the developmental psychologist, who also included a role of social experience. So the mind is not isolated or unitary. In the end, the terms likely come from the theorist’s relative importance placed on either the mind (innatens) or on social interaction.

<sup>2</sup>Bennett (2017).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>I thank Milton J. Bennett for its use here.

## References

- Bennett, M. J. (2013). *Basic concepts of intercultural communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Boston: Intercultural Press.
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- Mills, J., Birks, M. , & Hoare, K. (2014). Grounded theory. In J. Mills and M. Birks (Eds.), *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (pp 107-122).