

## REVIEW PAPER

# IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the fast development in the domains of technology, education and research, different cultures worldwide have become interconnected and we are all considered to be living in the global village. Mutual understanding and tolerance in such a community is of crucial importance. Thus, intercultural sensitivity has become a core concept that needs to be understood and promoted worldwide among both younger and older population. The aim of this paper is to analyze the concept of intercultural sensitivity and its importance. Moreover, the paper discusses different models of intercultural sensitivity and the importance of intercultural sensitivity training programs. It is expected that the paper will raise awareness about this fundamental issue, and will contribute to its further understanding.

**Keywords:** intercultural sensitivity, intercultural training, diversity, culture

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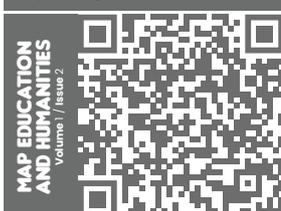
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### Introduction

While defining culture, Godwyn and Git-tell (2011) take into consideration various aspects. They state that it is characterized by shared basic assumptions, that a given group of people invent and develop it, and that new members are expected to be taught how to behave properly within it. In almost all parts of the world, living nowadays is marked by great cultural diversity, so it is almost impossible to live in a monocultural society. All over the world cultures relate to one another partly or fully, and thanks to modern technology, even cultures at distance might be interconnected (Foley & Mirazón Lahr, 2011). Moreover, seeking better education, a better quality of life, and career opportunities, not rarely do people travel across the globe and change their residence. In all of these situations, they face many challenges (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017; White & Rice, 2015), intercultural sensitivity, acceptance, tolerance towards diversity, being among them (Bennett, 2020).

Diversity has many useful insights over a wide range of applications (Mašić et al., 2020). Weitzman (1992) sees cultural diversity as the interconnection between people of various races and cultures. In other words, diversity means a range of differences in terms of culture, religion, skin color, language, race, gender, ethnicity, and it is believed that a variety of these differences bring numerous benefits. Tolerance towards diversity asks for more equality, intercultural communication, and collaboration and fights against segregation, discrimination, and stereotypes. Communication in an intercultural atmosphere is a vital part of the society's progress. Behaviors that are thought ethically proper are often functionally harmful to individuals and groups (Steinfatt & Millette, 2019).

Therefore, multiculturalism is a methodology that should be applied in diverse societies (Cantle, 2012). The USA is marked by a long history of multiculturalism and multicultural education for diverse ethnic groups. The intergroup education arose when African Americans and Mexican Americans were struggling for their employment, and better life opportunities in general, after WWII. They made their efforts to settle conflicts between different groups, and intercultural education was one way to achieve the goal. Hence, much work in the field of intercultural competencies can be traced back to the 1960s and some even to the 1930s in the context of the USA (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).

Interculturalism offers the appropriate framework for diversity in the modern world (Cantle, 2012). Interculturalism is a term that is used frequently in most European countries, with intercultural education being molded according to national, socio-political and educational systems. Different approaches in Europe towards intercultural education might be assigned to different national and cultural contexts since countries differ in their migration histories. For example, Belgium, Britain, the Netherlands, France, and Portugal had their history with colonial systems, while, on the other hand, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Luxemburg faced challenges with economic immigrants. Moreover, the countries of the Balkan peninsula, Eastern European countries, and new European Union countries have their own histories characterized by huge cultural diversity (Bećirović, 2012; Zilliacus & Holm, 2009).

However, regardless of the background, the focus of most modern societies is developing intercultural sensitivity, intercultural intelligence, and competencies among their students. The schools are required to include into their curricula the content which helps teachers to develop students' cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, instructors are expected to use a variety of methods in order to promote cultural diversity and develop intercultural competencies among students.

Although presenting a fundamental concept worldwide, cultural sensitivity still has not been fully grasped. Chen and Starosta (2020) deem that the main challenge is the confusion over three concepts: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communication competence. According to the authors, the three concepts, even though being connected with each other, are totally separate concepts (Chen & Starosta, 2020). The misunderstanding of the concepts makes the application of different intercultural training programs difficult. Chen and Starosta (2020) claimed that to build on a reasonable measure of intercultural sensitivity, scholars must limit the concept within the affective aspects of intercultural communication to make it differ from the above-mentioned concepts.

### Why intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity is an inevitable need in the present world, where people interact with each other, where cultures mix, where the international industry grows, international education

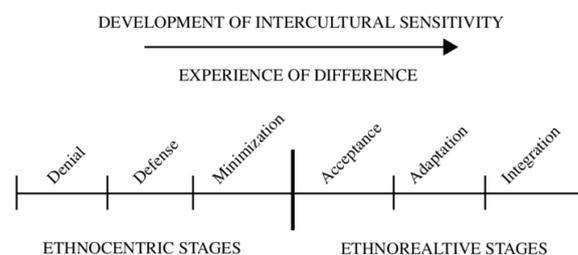
makes progress, and research is often conducted across different cultures and countries. It is totally impossible to live in today's world without communication and collaboration with individuals belonging to other nations and cultures (Ribo & Dubravac, 2021). The internet has fastened, facilitated, and enhanced communication among people located in different parts of the world. However, to maintain good relations and gain benefits from such communication, we need to be aware of the importance of intercultural sensitivity and possess intercultural competence for effective collaboration in a culturally diverse organization (Bennett, 2020). Intercultural sensitivity requires respect for all of those who are different, including exceptional individuals (Hamzć & Bećirović, 2021). It also requires respect for individuals with various socio-economic statuses (Delić & Bećirović, 2018).

The term derives its origins from the social science field of intercultural communication, i.e., the study of face-to-face interactions between culturally different people. In general terms, intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural settings and to interact correctly in a variety of cultural contexts. Chen and Starosta (2020) conceptualize intercultural sensitivity as a person's "ability" to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating in intercultural communication. It refers to the ability of a person to integrate in a new society and in a new culture. In other words, intercultural sensitivity deals with the ways in which one responds to new challenges in a different culture. Thus, important elements or aspects of intercultural sensitivity comprise: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement and non-judgment (Chen & Starosta, 2020). There are different models that promote the intercultural development, focusing on subjective cultural differences, mutual adaptation, common humanity and common organizational goals. One of them is the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) based on a constructivist view and the communication theory (Bennett, 2017).

According to this model, developing intercultural sensitivity, one passes through different stages (Figure 1). The first three stages are ethnocentric, and they are related to one's own experience of the native culture. The first stage is the stage of Denial, when a person experiences own culture as the only reality. The second stage is Defense, when one's own culture is seen as the best one. At the following stage, the stage of Minimi-

zation, a person is ready to accept other culture's aspects that are similar to one's own culture. The following three stages are ethnorelative stages, i.e., someone's own culture is experienced in the context of another culture. In the stage of Acceptance other cultures are further experienced as similarly complicated but different in structure. In Adaptation gaining more experience from different cultural contexts, one understands the other cultures. Finally, in the stage of Integration one's experience of self is developed to involve movement in and out of various cultural worldviews (Bennett, 2020).

**Figure 1:**  
*Development of Intercultural Sensitivity*



DMIS presents a grounded theory. Therefore, within this model, it is believed that the understanding of realism is based on experiences and that the more complicated experience results in more difficult involvement. DMIS coded observations about people who were showing progress in educational and commercial fields. A continuum process is followed to observe the competencies and then to apply theoretical structure that could explain the growth in terms of change through different stages (Bennett, 2017). However, although DMIS is a grounded theory, there are many quantitative measures of DMIS which have been tried or tested, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) being one of them. In all the cases researchers have attempted to use Likert scaling to rate statements that assumedly reflect DMIS stages (Bennett, 2017).

### Intercultural sensitivity and training programs

The importance of intercultural sensitivity in the world has forced scholars to investigate the concept from different perspectives. In practice, the concept has been unified through intercultural training programs, the basic steps that instructors have taken to develop the ability of intercultural sensitivity. Those training programs focus on "T-groups", critical incidents, case studies, role-playing and cultural orientation programs

(Chen & Starosta, 1997). They are believed to develop one's intercultural sensitivity, although the whole process is marked by variability influenced by different factors, such as one's level of tolerance, acceptance, the distance between first and second language (Yaman & Bećirović, 2016), but also the characteristics of host community members, i.e., how ready they are to accept foreigners to their community.

The aim of intercultural training is, on the one hand, to develop tolerance for cultural differences, and to promote cultural diversity, and on the other hand, to try to clear up the misunderstanding between different cultures and eliminate all forms of discrimination, segregation, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism. In fact, intercultural training increases one's intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competencies, and intercultural intelligence. They help individuals to interact with those of different cultures and use newly gained intercultural competencies as an advantage and not as a drawback (Bećirović & Podojak, 2018). Furthermore, it helps individuals to establish networks, communication, and collaboration with people from different cultures. Intercultural sensitivity training programs comprise six general categories, namely affective training, cognitive training, behavioral training, simulation training, cultural awareness training, and self-awareness training. Affective training, cognitive training, self-awareness-training, and cultural awareness training focus on the cognitive and affective understanding of one's own as well as the host culture (Graf & Mertesacker, 2009), while simulation training and behavioral training focus on the training of the specific behavior that is used as means to adjust better to a new culture (Earley & Peterson, 2004).

It is important to start with intercultural education as early as possible. In that respect, schools are very important. They should be the proper contexts through which the awareness about different forms of discrimination is raised (Kaur et al., 2017). To gain the benefits of students' intercultural competencies in higher education, we must internationalize higher education, we need to make educational institutions an environment in which students are connected to and benefit from each other (Stier, 2006). To make all this possible, much attention should be paid to teacher education (Sinanović & Bećirović, 2016). Intercultural sensitivity should be incorporated in their education and professional development, so that they are ready to promote it with younger generations (Cortina & Earl, 2020).

Moreover, teachers serve as a link between theory and practice. Working in classrooms they can provide scholars with useful information on intercultural competence among their students, and the issues they face (Dervić & Bećirović, 2020; Vogt, 2006). However, the concept of intercultural sensitivity should not be restricted to educational institutions. It should be promoted in various domains, ranging from foreign service institutes, politics, diplomacy to everyday life (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990).

Therefore, the whole society should take this concept seriously, and try to improve it among members. Future steps that might be taken in this respect are as follows: multicultural teams should be focused on intensive training; cultural general training should continue to gain acceptance as culturally specific training; more training within cultural contexts should be demanded by the global organization; language learning should assign more importance to intercultural competence (Laličić & Dubravac, 2021); intercultural competence should become the term referring to the combination of concepts, attitudes, and the skills necessary for effective cross-cultural interaction. These suggestions can significantly help us to grow in this global village, where intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication are an integral part of our societies.

### Conclusion

In the concept of intercultural sensitivity, the most important aspect is intercultural communication competence. Intercultural sensitivity can be seen as an approach that people have towards others, their behavior, views, attitudes, emotions in the process of intercultural communication. The demand for intercultural sensitivity in today's intercultural and multicultural societies is increasing with every passing day and we cannot ignore the importance of intercultural sensitivity in our daily life. Many scholars have written on this topic but the whole concept of intercultural sensitivity has not yet been fully described and applied in different areas of life and in different geographical regions. Thus, more research should be done in this field. The aim of this paper was to contribute to further understanding of the concept. Therefore, the paper discusses the term of intercultural sensitivity, its importance, the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, as well as the importance of intercultural sensitivity training programs. The paper is expected to raise awareness about the importance of tolerance towards different and different ones in all different aspects of life.

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