



Basic Intercultural Terminology

...for AFS
& Friends

The more one learns about the Intercultural Learning (ICL) field, the more intercultural terms one finds, and it is not always simple to understand from the context what the differences are among the numerous terms. Even if one decides to dig into intercultural theory and concepts, one will have a hard time finding definitive definitions for most of the vocabulary. Most ICL-related terms have more than one definition by more than one author, and can be used in different contexts. Therefore, this paper presents some of the most relevant intercultural terminology for our work in AFS. The definitions that appear here are those that are commonly used in the intercultural arena, but this document does not intend to cover all the possible explanations for each of these terms.

BASIC TERMS

When we think about general terms related to Intercultural Learning, the first one that comes to mind is the term “Intercultural” itself, especially because it can be confused or even, in some contexts, be used as a synonym for Cross-cultural and Multicultural.

INTERCULTURAL

The word “intercultural” is frequently related to the **relation, or interaction, among cultures**, or more specifically, among individuals of different cultural backgrounds. It can be expanded to the understanding of how culture affects these individuals’ behaviors and world views. Some experts say that the **term intercultural is usually preferred** (instead of cross-cultural) **in the academic side of the field**, whereas the term cross-cultural tends to be more used in the business side.

CROSS-CULTURAL

Although it can also be understood as the interaction between individuals from different cultures, the term cross-cultural is often used to describe **comparative studies** of different cultures. Consequently, in a cross-cultural approach, cultures will most often be studied in comparison to one another. According to some authors, the term cross-cultural tends to **focus more on cultures as nationalities**, whereas Intercultural would have a broader meaning, including any cultural group, varying in nationality but also religion, sexual orientation, gender, etc.

MULTICULTURAL

Differently from the two first, multicultural is usually used as a synonym of cultural diversity, describing a reality that exists. In general, this term is used in reference to the **presence or co-existence of different cultural groups** in the same space or environment.



INTERCULTURAL + ... INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Intercultural Learning is commonly understood as **a process that leads to a deeper awareness and understanding of one's own culture** (norms, behaviors, relationships and visions) **and of other cultures.**

Intercultural learning is also an area of research, study and application of knowledge about individual cultures, as well as their differences and similarities. It includes both an academic approach (theories and concepts) and practical applications. An example of this combination within the AFS Orientation Framework, and the AFS exchange program itself, is individuals are placed in situations in which they learn how to interact and live with people from different cultures.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

It can be said that one of the main goals of Intercultural Learning is to increase people's intercultural competences, that is, their **ability to interact and communicate in an effective and appropriate manner with people from different cultures** and in different cultural contexts.

In general, intercultural competence requires **three components: knowledge, skills and attitude.** The first one, knowledge, refers to the theoretical aspects of how different cultural groups behave, work, communicate and interact, as well as their values and assumptions. The second, skills, is related to one's ability to interpret, relate and act based on one's knowledge. And, thirdly, attitude is understood as a mindset, or the way we think and feel about cultural differences. As one can imagine, from these three components, the one that is most difficult to acquire or to change is attitude, since this component involves our deep-seated worldviews, assumptions and even feelings.

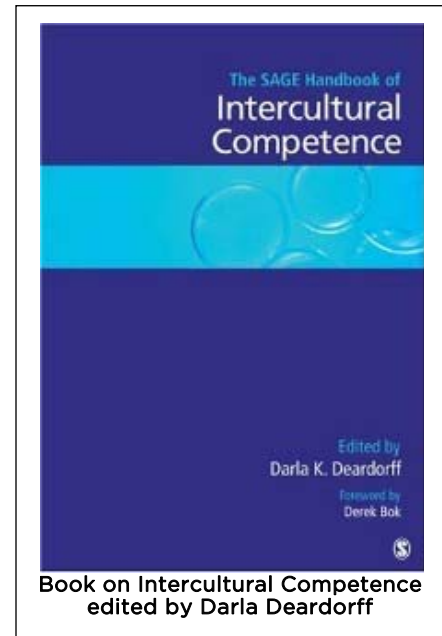
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

A straightforward definition of intercultural communication would be the communication among different cultural groups or individuals from different cultures and it involves the study of how culture affects the ways in which people communicate. The difference between this term and the term "Intercultural" is precisely the focus on communication, which includes not only the use of words (spoken and written language) but also non-verbal communication.

However, more than just a term or concept, **intercultural communication also refers to an academic field of study and its application to real situations.** This field closely interacts with other fields such as anthropology, communication, cultural studies, linguistics and psychology. Also, the theories developed in the field of intercultural communication can be applied in several different arenas, such as business, education, international relations, conflict management, advertising, and health care, among others. Some of the founding authors in the field are Edward T. Hall, Fons Trompennars and Geert Hofstede.

ETHNOCENTRISM VERSUS ETHNORELATIVISM

The concepts of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism are most frequently related to the stages of Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Bennett classifies the first three stages of his model as ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization), and the last three as ethnorelativistic stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration).



ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism is a word used to describe a point of view based on the individual's own culture or ethnic group, that is, it is **viewing one's own values as correct or normal, or even superior**, and the values of other cultures as wrong, abnormal or inferior. An ethnocentric view means that people see their own culture as the center and look at other cultures from the perspective of their own values.

ETHNORELATIVISM

The ethnorelative view is, by definition, **the opposite of the ethnocentric view**. In other words, in the ethnorelative stages, individuals acknowledge assumptions, values and behaviors of other cultures and are able to look at them from a relative perspective that is, taking into account the cultural contexts in which those elements are involved and are generated.



OTHER RELEVANT TERMINOLOGY

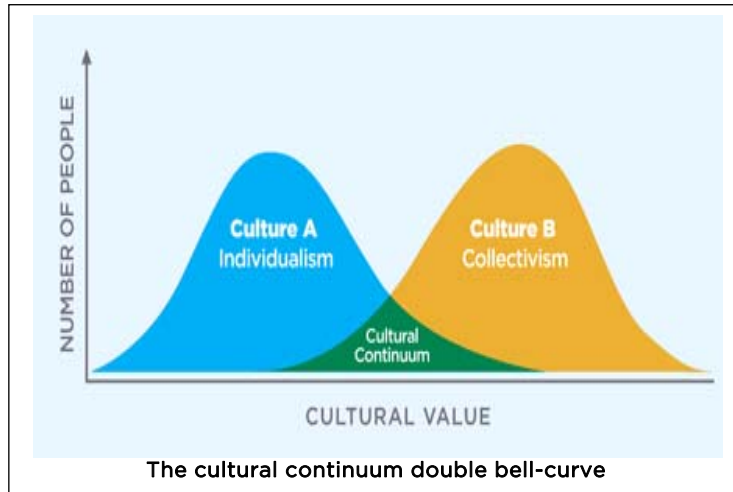
CULTURAL INFORMANT

Whenever someone is in a cultural context that is not his or her own, or is dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds, a cultural informant is usually one of the best allies one can have. A cultural informant is someone who has access to the most internal information related to a culture and is willing to share this information in an objective, unbiased way.

The cultural informant must, first of all, be someone you trust and feel comfortable with, such as a friend or a colleague. Besides that, ideally **the cultural informant is typically someone who is originally from the target culture**, but who is also familiar with the culture of the person s/he is assisting. This allows the cultural informant to be able to explain things based on a different point of view. In the case of AFS, the counselors or contact people who work directly with our participants are our best examples of cultural informants.

CULTURAL DEVIANTS OR OUTLIERS

In order to understand the term cultural deviants, one first needs to understand the idea contained in the graphic below. The blue curve shows the number of people in a certain culture that have individualism as a strong characteristic. Since most people in Culture A present a considerably high level of individualism, Culture A can be generalized as an individualistic culture, that is, individualism is a dominant cultural value. On the other hand, the orange curve shows the number of people in Culture B who are considered to be collectivist. Again, most individuals in this culture show a high level of collectivism, so Culture B can be generalized as a collectivist culture, or a culture in which collectivism is the dominant cultural value.



However, as can also be seen in the graphic (green area), not all individuals in Culture A are individualistic and not all individuals in Culture B are collectivist. Actually, there are a number of people in Culture A who are collectivist and a number of people in Culture B who are individualistic. And in fact, there might be some people from Culture A who are more collectivistic than the majority of people from Culture B, and vice versa. These people who have one (or more) cultural values different from the dominant cultural values of their culture are called cultural deviants.

The term deviant in English does not in and of itself have any negative meaning. However, it is often used in a negative way and some people prefer the term cultural outlier.

Basic Intercultural Terminology...

- ✓ is often difficult to define because different authors provide different definitions for many of the same terms.
- ✓ includes some very general and broad terms as well as others that are more specific, such as Cultural Informants and Cultural Deviants.
- ✓ can always be further explored. The Intercultural field is relatively new and there are constantly new theories, models, concepts, and terminology to read about.

For more theoretical information:

Bennett, M. (1998). *Basic concepts of intercultural communication: Selected readings.*

Deardorff, D. (2009). *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence.*