

6.26: What Makes Cultural Intelligence Unique?

Howard Gardner (1983). popularized the idea that intelligence is more than cognitive capacity—that human potential cannot be limited to cognitive intelligence the way it is described and defined in society. You can think about cultural intelligence as another form of intelligence. People with this particular intelligence have the ability to steer their way through unfamiliar cultural interactions; they do this in what seems to others as an effortless manner. This does not mean that culturally intelligent people are more intelligent overall than others; rather, those who are not skilled in this intelligence may need to adopt a different approach toward learning and improving their cultural intelligence.

According to Earley and Peterson, cultural intelligence is a significant improvement over existing approaches because it “provides an integrated approach to training dealing with knowledge and learning, motivation and behavior, and is built upon a unifying psychological model of cultural adaptation rather than the piecemeal and country-specific approach in training.” Earley & Peterson (2004), p. 101. David Thomas and Kerr Inkson (2003). wrote that, compared to emotional and social intelligence, cultural intelligence theory includes the influence of cultural factors and their impact in intercultural interactions.

Emotional intelligence is one’s ability and capacity to identify, assess, and manage one’s emotions as well as others’ emotions. Although extremely important, emotional intelligence “presumes a degree of familiarity within a culture and context that may exist across many cultures for a given individual.” Earley & Peterson (2004), p. 105 Similarly, the social cues picked up and used by someone with high **social intelligence**—that is, the ability and capacity to sense one’s inner state, feelings, and thoughts in relation to one’s social environment, and react appropriately in this environment for social success Goleman (2006), pp. 83–84.—differs from culture to culture.

Earley and Peterson argue that **adaptation** is a requirement when one enters new cultural contexts, and cultural intelligence provides the theoretical background for understanding how one would need to adjust, adapt, or reinvent oneself based on the culture and the situation. Earley & Peterson (2004). Someone with high emotional and social intelligence is not guaranteed to be culturally intelligent, although having those skills can make it easier for them to learn about cultural intelligence. This is illustrated in the following case study.

Martha works as a program director for a large nonprofit that directs volunteer programs. Her co-workers describe her as, “personable, outgoing, empathic, and caring.” Whenever there is conflict or unsettled business, she is the “go to person” for helping her colleagues work out their issues. Her ability to be empathetic enables her to understand others’ thoughts and feelings as well as their intentions.

When Martha gets upset or frustrated, she “takes a pause” or will back away from the issue or person until she can get a hold of her emotions. If Martha is asked how she manages her emotions, she replies that meditation and exercise help her to regulate how she feels from moment to moment. She’s even led agency wide sessions on self-care and exercise.

Volunteers who work for Martha love that she cares about their needs. During workshops and events she introduces volunteers to one another, helping them to learn about and get to know each other. Martha is also very attuned to those around her by listening and observing, which makes her a great program director for volunteers.

Martha’s emotional and social intelligences are high, which makes it difficult for Lorraine, Martha’s direct supervisor, to understand why Martha has such challenges working with people of cultural groups different than her own. Martha, as her jovial self, is always kind and thoughtful, but sometimes she will say culturally inappropriate things, not aware that she’s said them.

One of the volunteers who is Southeast Asian has noted, “I like Martha but it seems like she just doesn’t understand me. Like the time I had to cancel my tutoring shift. No one was watching my sister’s baby so I had to watch her. I told Martha and she was real nice and understanding, but I feel that she didn’t *really* understand that I have an obligation to my family before this volunteer job. I had to explain to her that this is what it’s like in my culture, that family comes first. Then, she nodded and understood.”

In this case, although Martha is empathic, she does not understand that the volunteer has very specific cultural needs. Her empathy is not viewed as authentic because Martha does not understand, nor does she pick up on, the cultural cues, thus leading the volunteer to feel the way she feels. **Empathy** is a good foundation for intercultural relationships, but awareness of cultural nuances is critical for making the connection.

The following describes other ways in which scholars and practitioners believe cultural intelligence is different from other approaches:

- Cultural intelligence is a growing field that is continuously being researched and tested in many societies. A search on the Internet for the word “cultural intelligence” yields over 2.7 million hits. When searching for academic papers and scholarship, the word yields almost 1.5 million hits. Other intercultural approaches do not yield as much universal appeal as cultural intelligence.
- Cultural intelligence demands that leaders gather more than knowledge of cultural facts. It is awareness of how culture works, of the values and beliefs that ground a person’s thinking and motivation, and of exploring behavioral intelligence.
- Cultural intelligence emphasizes a circular path, not a linear one; this means that, over time, one will continue to learn and their cultural intelligence will expand. It is not a step-by-step process that culminates in an “ultimate outcome.” Rather, through cultural intelligence, one learns more about him- or herself and his or her ability to interact with different cultures. There is always room for improvement and development in cultural intelligence.
- Cultural intelligence does not speak to specific cultures. Cultural intelligence is a broad approach that looks at developing a set of skills, as well as awareness and knowledge, that help you to adapt and interact with multiple cultures.

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