Didactic materials for training for universities' administrative staff preparing for servicing foreign students
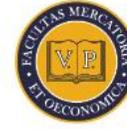
## Aim & scope of syllabus & didactic materials

Foreign students are students who decide to undertake some or part of their education to a foreign university abroad. There are many reasons behind a student's choice to move abroad and study; they might seek to gain life experiences, be exposed to a different university system and teaching methods, meet people from around the world, etc. Regardless of the motives of such a decision, foreign students constitute an integral part of the university structure. As such, it is essential that they receive equal treatment to home students. To achieve this, administrative staff ought to be well-informed and trained to avoid prejudices of any kind when servicing foreign students. The goal of these didactic materials is to do exactly this: to inform administrative staff how to be open-minded to difference (whether cultural, religious, political, social, etc.), welcome the foreign students and consider them as an important part of the university student body and life.

This training gives emphasis to concepts related to culture (intercultural encounters, stereotypes, multiculturalism, culture shock) and aims to promote skills to administrative staff in order to facilitate their communication with foreign students.

Theoretical Background
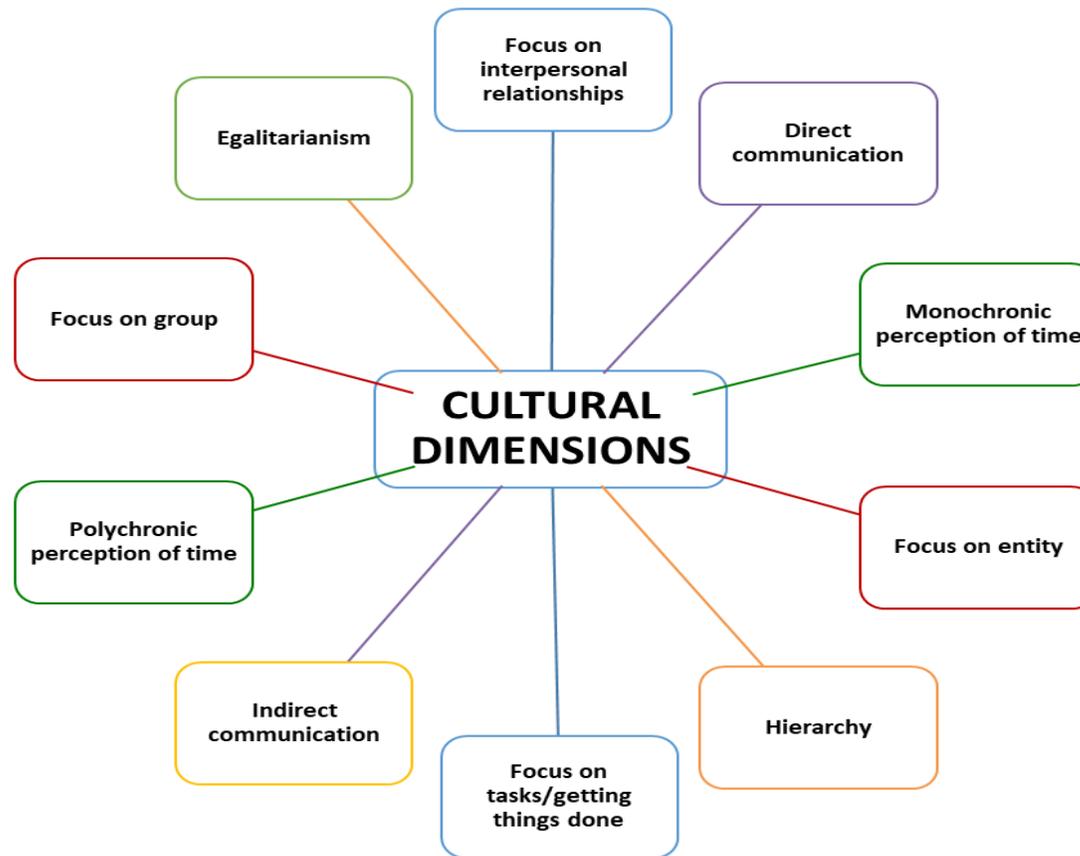
This cultural dimensions model refers to the cultural dimensions that underlie valuation systems of reality. It consists of opposing pairs of cultural dimensions (e.g. focus on group vs. focus on entity). These cultural dimensions allow us to learn about our own preferences as well as the preferences of people from different backgrounds. They are useful for understanding the differences between cultures and perspectives and help us describe attitudes, norms and values which the representatives of other cultures are guided by.

Theoretical Background

Hofstede's onion model of culture

This model shows how culture is comprised by a number of layers. The outer layer represents cultural artefacts such as words, clothing, accents. The next layer termed 'Heroes' refers to the role models with behavioral characteristics that are prized in a culture. 'Rituals' is composed of collective activities, tradition. This could include greetings, ceremonies, practices such as having a meal with family. At the core of the onion represents the core of culture, the values and that is implicitly learned, for example right vs. wrong, paradoxical vs. logical, etc.)

People tend to form opinions and judge others by external factors. This model is useful as it helps people understand that culture is not a concept that carries a single meaning; on the contrary, it is rather complex, and it is made up by interlinked elements. Some elements are easily noticeable (on the outer layer) while others can be discovered during interaction between people.

Symbols
Heroes
Rituals
Practices
Values
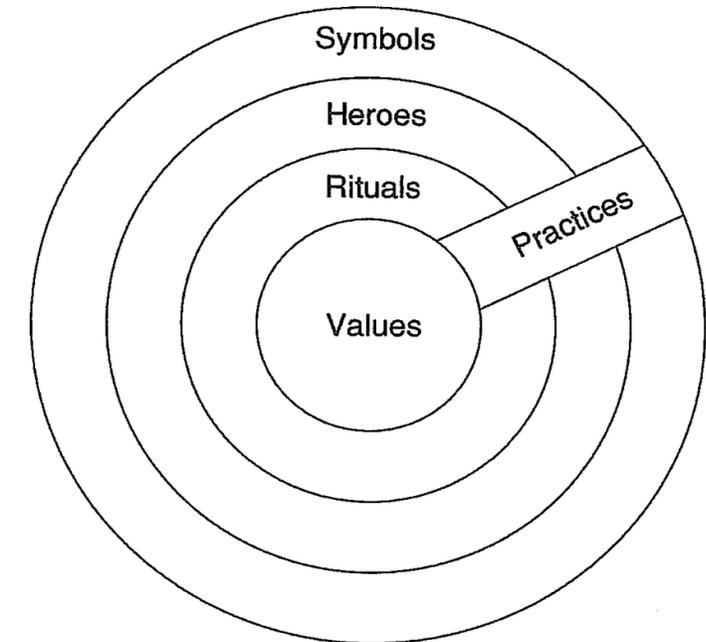
Theoretical Background

Hall's Iceberg Model of Culture

According to Hall, culture is analogous to an iceberg. There are some aspects that are above the surface of the water which are visible and many others below the surface and therefore invisible.

The external (conscious) part of the culture is situated at the part of the iceberg which exists above the surface of water. This part refers to behaviours and beliefs. The part which is below the water line, the internal (unconscious) part, consists of the values and thought patterns of a culture.

This model indicates that people can easily identify the external parts of one culture. However, to discover the internal part, active participation is needed in this culture. This model helps people understand that only by active participation and time can one fully comprehend the values and beliefs that a culture is built upon.
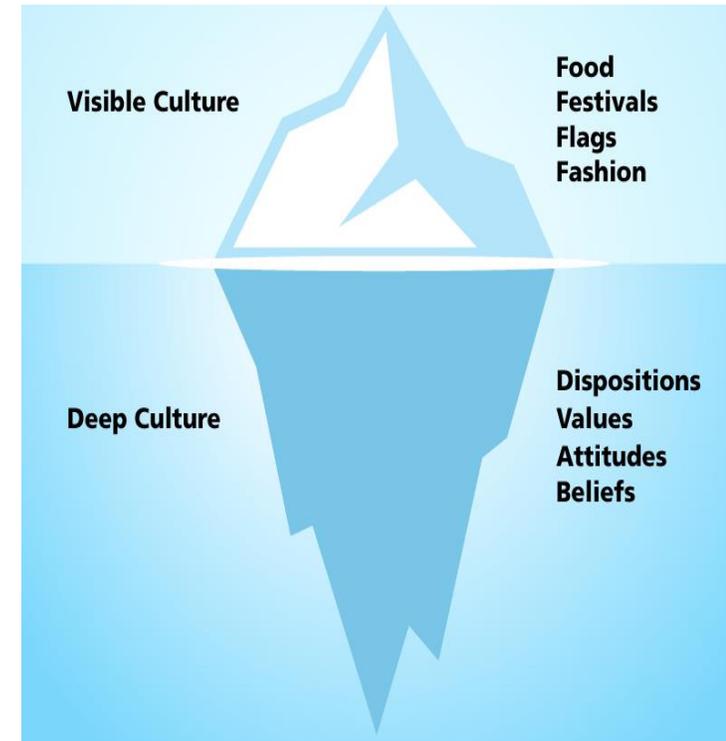
Adapted from *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall (1976)

Theoretical Background

Basic Elements of Culture

1. Language: entrance to culture, specific meaning and terminology common to people from the same culture

2. Symbols: each culture is a system of symbols (e.g. bow head, raise hand, wave, etc.) which differ between cultures and people

3. Norms: rules and guidelines regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior of people – again, differ between cultures

4. Values: social product and highly depends on culture

5. Beliefs: (e.g. religious items: Christian – bible and cross, Muslim - Quran, Sikh – bangle in hand)

6. Cognitive Elements: elements people acquire to cope with social situations

Cultural Differences

Different cultures have different customs and traditions. It is these differences that make each culture unique. However, to the unaccustomed eye, these differences are open to (mis)interpretations and at times can cause misunderstandings and/or offence. It is important to remember that cultures are multi-dimensional so be open-minded!

- In Africa and Middle East when men hold hands signifies friendship and trust. It is however a sign of courtship in Europe.

- In Taiwan and China burping after food and slurping in Japan is considered a sign of appreciation of food just consumed. However, eating loudly is seen as a lack of etiquette and is frowned upon in Europe.

- In Singapore, chewing gum is illegal.

- In Thailand, it is rude and a great offence to touch someone's head as it is considered the most sacred part of the body.

Theoretical Background – Hall's Cultural Dimensions

Low vs High Context

Culture

Monochronic vs. Polychronic Time

Proxemics/ Personal Space
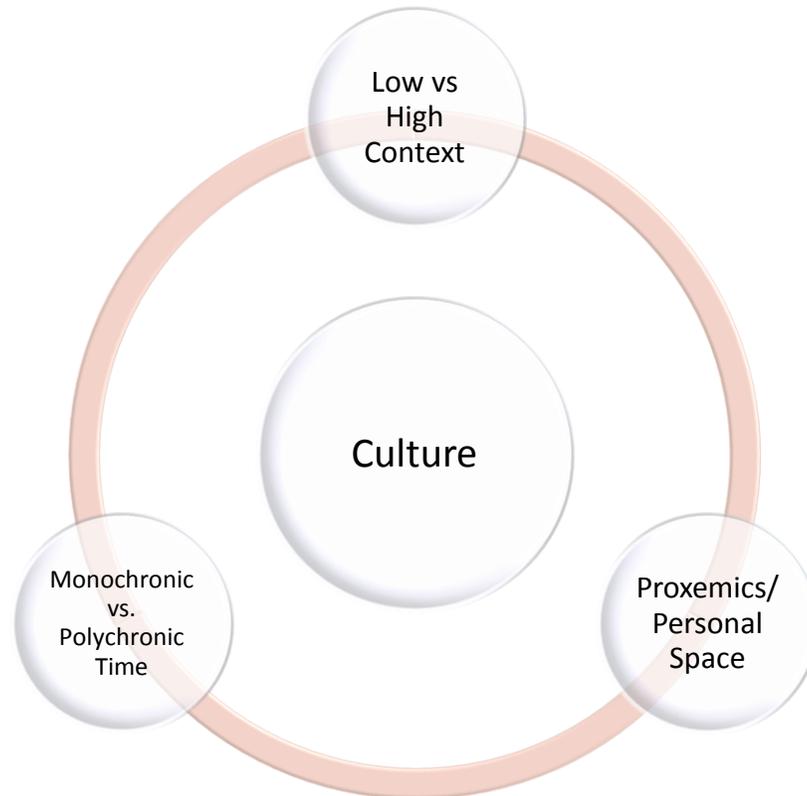
High context cultures (e.g. Greek, Arab, Chinese)

Interpersonal relationships: dependence on shared understanding of information (e.g. social trust – less need to rely on paper contracts/agreements), strong focus on social networks, emphasis is given on social rather than legal restrictions

- Rely on **implicit** communication and non-verbal cues. For a message to be understood, a lot of background information is needed.

- There is close proximity to others (**less personal space**) and less respect for privacy.

- Polychronic Time: people/things/events have their own time. **No punctuality** is emphasized.

Edward T. Hall (1990)

Theoretical Background – Hall's Cultural Dimensions

Low context cultures (e.g. USA, Australia, Scandinavia, Germans)

Interpersonal relationships: trust is heavily depended on written word (e.g. contracts for conducting business), responsibility lies with the individual rather with the group

- Rely on **explicit** communication and an explanation/definition of information is given.

- Privacy is important & **personal space is greatly valued**

- Monochronic Time: punctuality is very important

This model is important for raising awareness of cultural differences and for reinforcing more effective cultural understanding.

Theoretical Background – Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Power Distance Index: measures extend to which the less powerful members accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Countries with high score (e.g. Malaysia) -younger people expect to be guided and directed towards the completion of a task. Countries with low score (e.g. Austria)– supervisors and employees are almost equals)

Individualism vs. Collectivism: represents degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In collectivist cultures people exhibit loyalty and there is strong sense of security vs. Individualistic culture.

Masculinity vs. Femininity: refers to distribution of gender roles, for instance mean are more assertive and competitive, women are more modest and caring.

Geert H. Hofstede (2010)
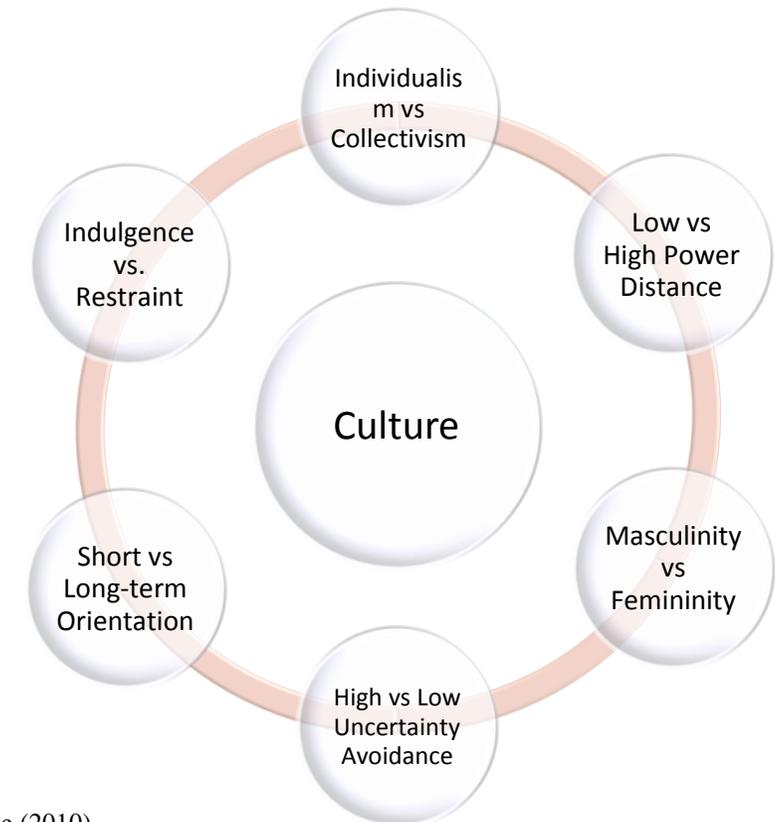
Theoretical Background – Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Uncertainty Avoidance Index: describes how well people can cope with anxiety. Countries with low score – people are more open to change or innovation.

Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation: refers to degree to which society views its time horizon. Short-term orientation cultures place emphasis on the present and on quick results while long-term orientation cultures focus on the future and long-term growth.

Indulgence vs. Restraint: Countries with high score allow free gratification of people's emotions, conduct and behaviors. Countries with low score have stricter social norms.

This model is useful for understanding the unknown, comprehending different elements of culture, avoid making wrong judgement of people and enhance cultural sensitivity.

Theoretical Background

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES:

Advantages:

System of security

Feeling of connection with others

Strong traditions

Disadvantages:

Change to society might come slowly due to strong group identification

Feeling of restriction of individuals

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF LOW CONTEXT CULTURES:

Advantages:

Possibility of change

Flexibility of society and individuals

Disadvantages:

Less commitment to a system

Not tied to a family or society

Less trust

Theoretical Background
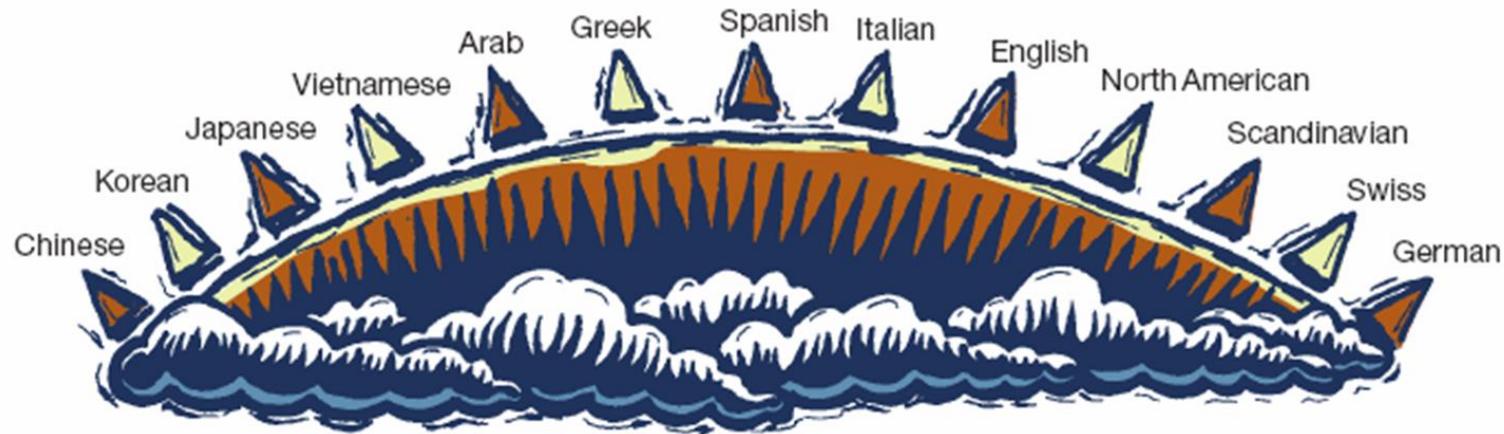
Kreitnet, Kinicki, 2013, McGrHill

Theoretical Background – Stages of Culture Shock

Culture shock can be defined as the uncomfortable feeling/feeling of disorientation one might experience when finding him/herself in an unfamiliar culture or way of life. There are five stages of culture shock:

Stage 1
- Honeymoon

Stage 2
- Hostility & Irritability

Stage 3
- Gradual Adjustment

Stage 4
- Adaptation

Stage 5
- Re-entry Travel Shock

Kalervo Oberg (1958)
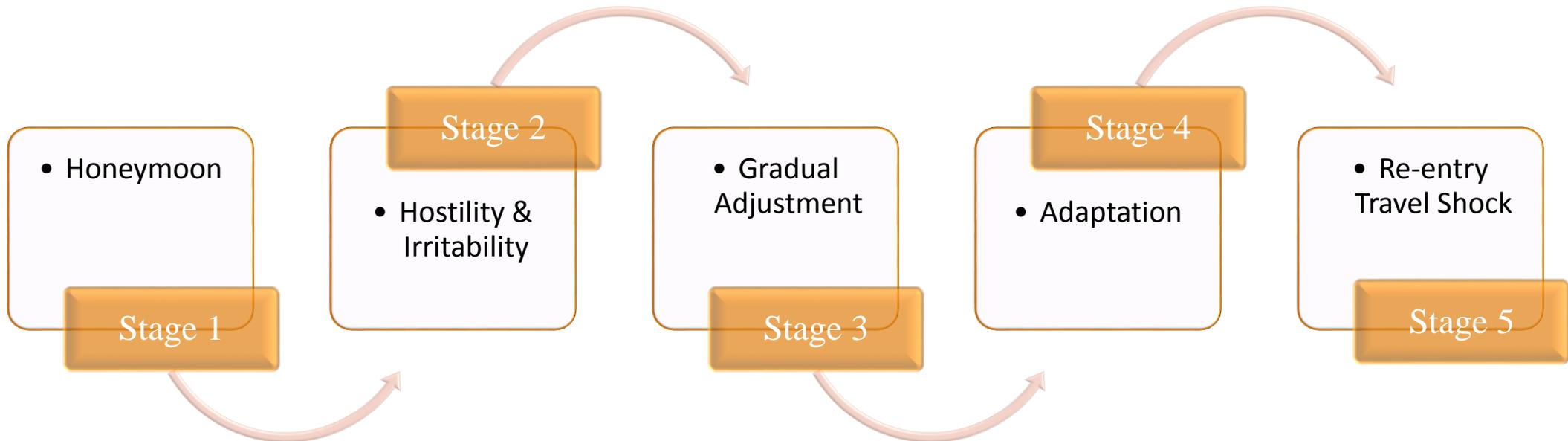
Stereotypes

Definition:

The term 'cultural generalisation' refers to a statement about a group of people. For example, Greeks and Spanish are less punctual than people from Germany. A cultural generalisation can turn into a stereotype if used to describe individual members of a group. For instance, it is a stereotype to effortlessly assume that just because someone is Greek is also not punctual in meetings. Based on this, a cultural 'stereotype' is the application of a generalisation to every member of a group.

Importance and function:

Overall, one should be aware of the fact that we cannot avoid making generalisations because they are part of our (human) perception. Every object of has been assigned in a certain category which automatically associates it with other similar objects and contrasts it with different objects. An object of perception cannot exist without some set of associations. For example, a letter is an object of our human perception which is associated to the category of forms of communication, just as an email is. However, it also belongs to the category of old-fashioned form of communication in contrast to the email which belongs to a technology-enhanced forms of communication.

Stereotypes

Culture can be seen as a categorisation of people. It is common for people to belong to groups and share similar characteristics. However, members of the culture may vary as to *how much* they share the groups' common elements. Stereotypes arise when one denies that variation and assume that these traits apply to *all* members of a community.

Bennett (2013) 'Stereotypes/Generalizations: Extended Encyclopedia Entries' in C. Cortés (Ed) Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia. New York: Sage

Theoretical Background - Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Experience of Difference

Denial | Defense | Minimization | Acceptance | Adaptation | Integration

Ethnocentrism → Ethnorelativism
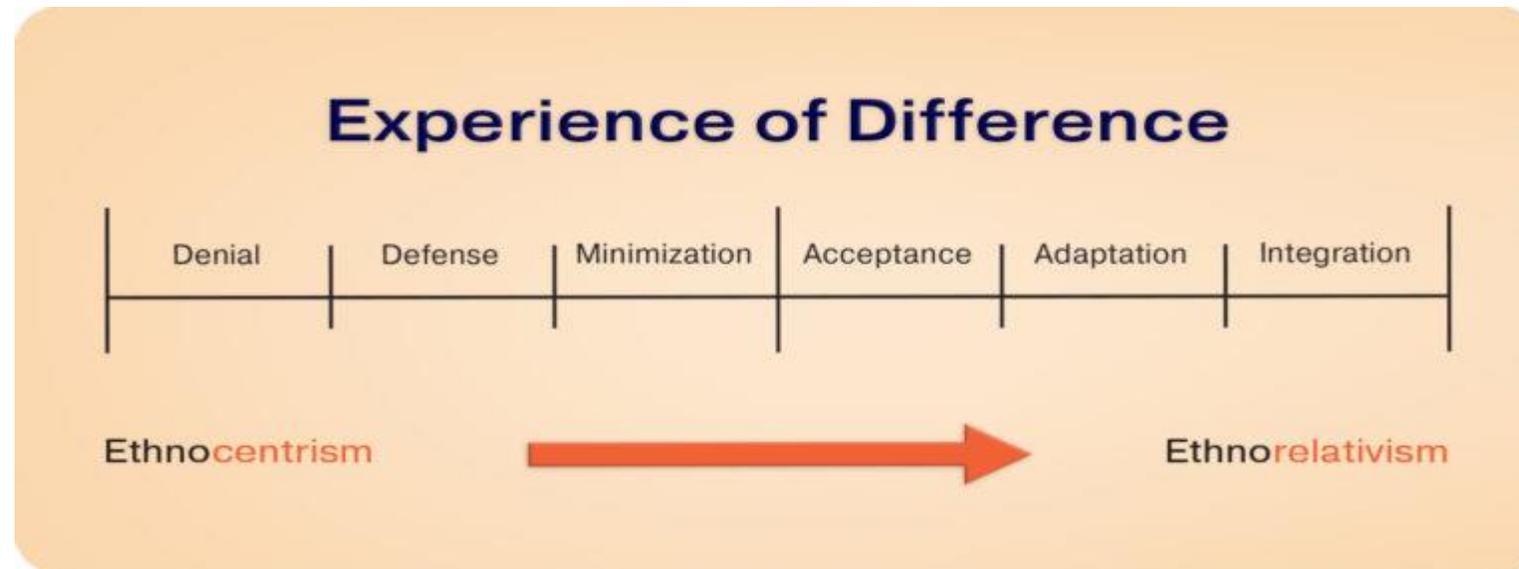
M. Bennett (1986)

The progress people follow from an ethnocentric toward an ethnorelative view and a deeper understanding of cross-cultural differences