



INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY – CULTURE AS CONTEXT

Cultural differences can be stark or nuanced, across continents or within the same family. One common definition for Intercultural Competency is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures, through awareness, empathy, and intentional efforts to avoid violating the contexts created by the other culture. Cultural contact and knowledge may not lead to competency.

Challenges to the development and exercise of Intercultural Competency may occur when societally dominant groups are considered the norm, or *normal*, such that others are viewed on a scale so measured. The idea of a singular or ideal norm – whether beauty, religion, sexuality, politics, or values are measured – creates a sense of *otherness*, and of culture as belonging to *different* others, not us. Thus, one goal of intercultural competency may be the ability to see others as normal, and not as failed or imperfect versions of ourselves.

Culture creates the context through which we see and experience the world. Our status as women or men in societies that historically or presently regard and treat women differently may create cultural norms in each case, as may our status as persons of color, persons who are white, persons who are gay or transgender, persons who are religious or not religious, persons who have disabilities, and so on.

Interestingly, although dominant groups may not regard themselves as having a context or way of seeing the world based on their historical and present identities, persons who are not members of the dominant group may tend to regard members of the dominant group as possessing a distinct culture.

When we are members of the dominant group we may believe our actions are free from cultural judgments, and we may feel our best course is therefore to be blind to seeming differences, as a way to mute the message that difference is marginalizing. When this happens we may fail to consider and examine the often unconscious and well-intentioned yet adverse and potentially marginalizing impacts of our interactions with others whose perceptions and experiences may be shaped by their identities.

For example, in culturally diverse groups pursuing the betterment of members of marginalized identities, a dominant group member may speak first or last or on behalf of all marginalized group members, without conscious awareness of the potential for confirming their status as a privileged member of the dominant group in the eyes of others. This is not at all to say that members of the dominant group are wrong or bad people in such cases. Rather, it might be taken to suggest that when we *intend* to be culturally competent, we might choose to be vigilantly aware of our own cultural cues and of the context within which individuals of other cultures may receive or perceive our interactions.

If we *intend* to be culturally competent, we might consciously act with empathy and awareness of the cultural contexts and perspectives of others with whom we interact. This can spread honor all around. Ultimately, context can elevate our interactions from a place of judgment to a place of understanding. It immerses us in the experience of others *from their perspective* and enhances our critical thinking skills. It takes us beyond sampling food, music, attire, language, art and architecture, towards a shared appreciation for the humanity of all. [Deanie Brown](#). Associate Chancellor for Access and Equal Opportunity