

A conversation on cultural identity and integration:
Milton Bennett interviewed by Patrick Boylan

Milton Bennet is a seminal figure in the intercultural field. As a youth he joined the Peace Corps, the American volunteer organization created by President Kennedy in 1961 to send young people overseas to help with aid projects in the Developing World, but mostly as ambassadors of the "other America" – the one that said it wanted peace and reciprocal understanding.

The project was an initial failure: the young people sent abroad were unprepared for the culture shocks awaiting them in their contact with peoples whose everyday life and lived values were so vastly different. Many of these young Americans returned home after only the first few weeks, disheartened by the culture shocks, the promiscuous living conditions, the lack of sanitation and electricity, and, worst of all, the difficulty in establishing genuine contact with the population – and thus the loneliness.

So Kennedy set up a task force to organize pre-departure training courses in the local languages, in the local life styles and, in addition, in a new skill, one that had no name at that time but that gradually became known in later years as "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC).

As for Milton, either the ICC courses proved effective, or he was particularly resilient: in any case he held out in Micronesia for two long years (1968-70). When he came home, he decided to study intercultural communication at the University of Minnesota where a fledgling course had meanwhile been set up. Where he went from there is recounted in the blurb on him you will find in the "Notes on contributors" section at the back of this issue.

So here is this ex-Peace Corps volunteer who, in his youth, spent two years in Micronesia wondering all the time he was there if he was **really** understanding the people he encountered in his daily activities, and who today, forty years later, is still wondering. This, apparently, is the secret of his success.

It's that infinite will to hold off judgment, listen attentively, accept uncertainty and make do with "emerging realities" that never emerge completely, that enables him to be so effective in diagnosing intercultural communication breakdowns and helping the parties reach some kind of understanding. I could see, as the interview went along, that he was doing precisely that to me: diagnosing me and trying to help me define the questions I thought I had clearly articulated before the encounter. How well he succeeded will be evident on reading the transcription.

In any case, what I had thought I wanted to discover, in asking Milton for the interview, were his views on the concept of "identity" – how much it is socially determined or self-determined – and whether we can really know (and assimilate into our identity) strikingly different cultural realities, ones that seemingly have no correspondences in our world. And this doubt then raises the question of multiple identities: if we do manage to incorporate radically different cultures into our identity, how can we then avoid inner conflicts? The question applies to individuals as well as to global companies and multiethnic societies.

But as the interview proceeded, it gradually became clear that the real question I had in the back of my mind was another: it was whether, in order to interact effectively with people of a different culture, we need to constitute a new identity, one consonant with theirs.

No one doubts that to interact effectively with our interlocutors we need to share at least *some* values with them – as a starter, the dictionary values of the words we use so that we can begin to understand each other. But in fact, it would seem that we need to share much more than that. How much more? Is it enough merely to "accept" our interlocutors' ways of doing things and their value system? Or do we need to go further and try to adapt ourselves to their habits and to their value system? Indeed, perhaps we ought to do even more: integrate their value system into ours and thus, by being able to switch identities, "be" like them during our encounters? And should we choose to integrate into their culture, what becomes of our native identity? Do we risk schizophrenia? These questions easily arise in any serious intercultural training or coaching session.

Similar questions are also raised by many sociologists, in reflecting on their work in the field. "To be or not to be (*a participant* observer), that is the question." Bourdieu wrote that successful interviewers should be able to attune themselves to their interviewees "through forgetfulness of self", thus undergoing "a true transformation" of the way they view their subjects "in the ordinary circumstances of life" (Bourdieu, 1966: 24). But does this mean that these interviewers should learn to belong, almost as members, to their subjects' world – at least for the duration of the interview? Is this what the concept of integration implies?

With these questions buzzing through my mind, I turned the recorder on and began.

An update on Milton Bennett's current work

BOYLAN: Thanks, Milton, for finding the time to be interviewed. Most of our readers will be familiar with your past work; perhaps you could begin by filling them in on what you are doing currently.

BENNETT: I continue my connection with the Intercultural Communication Institute (ICI) in Portland, Oregon, which has offered for many years, and continues to offer, professional development in Intercultural Communication (IC) and Intercultural Relations (IR). Specifically, I'm in the faculty of the Master's program that we offer in conjunction with the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, besides teaching one or two courses in the summer institute we run at ICI every July.

But I would say that more of my activity now has been moving towards Europe and Asia and that activity is of essentially three types: predominately with the Intercultural Development Research Institute (IDRI) in Milan, which is a different entity than the ICI. The purpose of IDRI is to sponsor research specifically in developmental or constructivist approaches to intercultural work and to support dissemination of that perspective.

BOYLAN: But it's not an institute as in Portland, right? You can't go to IDRI and take a course.

BENNETT: Probably within the year we will be beginning to offer courses: not in TOT (the Training of Trainers), but specifically in the perspective of a constructivist approach to intercultural work, perhaps something research-oriented.

In addition to that there's my consulting work, to some extent corporate, i.e. executive training programs for enterprise consortia. Companies typically send executives to joint training programs that are offered in multiple places in the world and I'm brought in as a faculty person for those programs. So that's mainly what I'm doing on the corporate side.

BOYLAN: So training, but not coaching.

BENNETT: I also do some coaching but it's typically around IDI, using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993). Although I am certainly hoping that there will be some alternative measurements coming along, so far I still think that's the best one and so I use that.

In the educational sphere, I'm doing a big project with an international school here in Milan, a multiple year project to help develop faculty and international baccalaureate curricula, integrating the concepts of intercultural learning ([Bennett, 2009](#)). I also teach occasionally in universities in the U.S. as well as in Europe: Jyväskylä, Helsinki, several universities in Germany and of course here at the University of Milan Bicocca, in their graduate program. Essentially it's an International Relations program, but IC/IR come into the teaching of the Sociology of Cultural Processes.

BOYLAN: How do you feel – as a person, as Milton Bennett, the man – in front of all these different audiences: university students, high school students, corporate execs in training programs?

BENNETT: That's a wonderful question, Patrick. But I'll tell you: every time that I'm successful – in the sense of being understood and helping people learn things that make a difference to them – I feel an immense sense of gratification in being able to operate in such different worlds.

BOYLAN: But do you feel more “yourself” with company executives than, say, with high school kids? Or with university grad students?

BENNETT: You know, that goes right to the central question of our interview, I think.

BOYLAN: You mean, what is “yourself”?

BENNETT: Precisely, which is really the identity issue. So I would say, just to begin, that I feel equally myself in all three of those situations.

BOYLAN: And yet you act differently and assume different mind sets: after all, you hardly interact with school kids as you do with corporate execs, right? Nonetheless, while being three different Milton Bennetts, you say you remain “yourself”. So let's clarify what that means, that is, what you mean when you speak of your “identity.” Especially your cultural identity.

Are cultural identities imposed or freely constructed?

BOYLAN: Bourdieu offers a good starting point. As you know, some people – not me but many people – consider his perspective to be highly deterministic, culture being a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990), a habit of mind that you acquire under the influence of family, schooling, etc. And that makes up your identity to a large extent.

I say “highly” deterministic because you become structured not only cognitively but also affectively and volitionally. That is, you do not simply acquire a certain vision or interpretation of the world, through certain conceptual (cognitive) schemes. You also become structured affectively and volitionally. That is to say, you learn to like and want what your society manages to get you to like and to want – unless you rebel in some way. But even then you rebel in characteristic ways. You, Milton, rebelled as a 1968 “flower-power” hippy, right? Thus you rebelled in an American way, based on what and where you were at that time. In other words, even when you were rebelling against your American upbringing, you were subservient to your American *habitus*.

Well now, if that is Bourdieu's account of cultural influence, it makes for a highly deterministic world, doesn't it?

Whereas in your writings, I get the impression that you think that people are free in determining their identities as individuals, at least to a large extent. Can you elaborate on that view?

BENNETT: Yes, and I do think the issue is epistemological. I'm not sure, though, that I agree that Bourdieu is "highly deterministic"; I classify him more as a relativist in the sense that he recognizes and talks a lot about perspective and operating in a field. His discourse is more typical of a relativist than a positivist. But, that said, yes, I would differentiate myself from his views, mainly because I favor constructivism as a paradigm, rather than the more systems-based thinking that, in my opinion, characterizes Bourdieu. Quantum Thinking (DePorter, 2000; Vella, 2002) and, more generally, constructivist thinking hold that, by transacting with phenomena, we generate reality. Reality is an emergent quality of our transaction with phenomena. This differs from the strictly relativist approach which holds that there is indeed a reality somewhere out there, although it is necessarily constrained by one's perspective of it. Any given individual can catch a glimpse of that reality, but only in a particular way, depending on where that person is located in time and space or, as Bourdieu would put it, depending on that person's history, as synthesized in his or her habit of mind. This is what seems to me to be the mainstream way of describing how we see reality if we are strict relativists. Whereas the constructivist view is somewhat different. It asserts that, epistemologically, we can only describe the emergent quality of our transaction with phenomena, but not the phenomena itself, neither wholly nor partially.

BOYLAN: So any object is only what I have made it to be for me up to a certain point, in my interaction with it. For a small child, who uses the lipstick he found in his mother's room as a crayon, that lipstick IS a crayon. At least, until his mother enters the room: from that point on, "what the lipstick is" will be a co-creation between the child, the lipstick and now his mother. Is that it? And when you say "emergent," do you imply that it is always evolving, it is always constituting itself, and is never defined or definable?

BENNETT: Let's say it's defined insofar as you define it.

BOYLAN: So we create it. When, for example, we have the impression that we have "perceived" a certain trait of a given culture and we put a label on that trait, we are in fact creating it, using fragments of the various interpretive schemes stored in our memory. Like the child who labels the lipstick "a crayon," based on his experience of crayons. Is that the point?

BENNETT: Yes, indeed. And it is most definitely an on-going, generative act.

BOYLAN: But, you know, I believe most strict relativists would say the same thing. They would say that we construct what we then perceive as our realities. And, like you, they would add that we do so using the mental tools that society has given us – which explains how our constructions are so similar, albeit not equal, to those of other people in our culture. This fact is what

permits us to communicate with the other people in our home context, or work context, or whatever context.

For example, when we use even common words like "clean" or "love" or "yes", we construct meanings for them that are based on what passes for "clean" and for "love" or for "yes" in a given context, say in our family; this ensures that all of us in the family understand each other, more or less, when we use these words. But if we interact with a person from another family or another culture, we may discover that this person has constructed a different representation of the reality that these words are supposed to represent. This person might exclaim, on visiting our home: "How can you call your kitchen 'clean', it isn't, it's f-i-l-t-h-y!"

In other words, we, as members of a given tribe, construct what passes for "objective realities" within our tribe – for example, our idea of what cleanliness is. And we think these "realities" constitute absolute reality. But that is not so. Because there is no absolute reality, or, more precisely, none that is knowable in itself, as an absolute value. For example, the word "clean" means nothing in itself, as an absolute value. It only means what a given community has decided it means. And even then, there may be given sub-communities, like the teenage children in a family, who perceive the "reality" of cleanliness differently from their parents. Isn't this what constructivism holds, too?

BENNETT: I suppose you can find a blend or even a confusion between these two paradigms. That's why I emphasized the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. (By epistemological I mean what we are able to know about reality; by ontological I mean what the nature of reality consists of.)

Insofar as you take the nature of reality as having some kind of on-going, independent existence, then I would call your view a "strict relativist" one, since it is constrained by some system or field.

A relativist view of reality is different from an absolutist view. For both, reality exists "out there" as a single "thing", but for the absolutist there is only one "correct" view of it. For the relativist it appears differently to different people, like the elephant that six blind men describe differently because they touch different parts of it. In spite of its variable appearances, though, reality exists for the strict relativist as an entity with an independent existence, even if we can never know it completely as such.

If, on the other hand, you take a constructivist position, then reality is only an emergent quality of our transactions with events, not a given. It is always "yet to define itself."

This means, in your work as a constructivist intercultural trainer or coach, that the realities that you try to come to grips with are quite different from the realities that a positivist trainer or coach tries to come to grips with.

If you're a positivist, for instance, you think you can grasp the reality of a client's intercultural competence or of a foreign person's cultural heritage with a simple questionnaire, and then pigeon-hole that competence or that culture using a chart or an inventory of traits. And you are convinced that your chart maps really-existing qualities, and that the traits you list have real existence. But if you're a constructivist, you find all that illusory. Instead, you try to get to know that competence or that culture through reconstructing it within you, by analogy with something outside you that you can only glimpse as in a dark mirror. To be more exact, you *co-construct* that "emerging reality" within you, by interacting with that client or that foreign partner in certain controlled ways. This is what little children do, too. They constantly test their mother or father to see how much they can get away with. They "map" their parents' value system (the "Accepted Rules of Behavior" which even their parents may be incapable of defining precisely, at least in many borderline cases) as a constantly emerging reality that, through repeated testing, gradually takes shape within their minds – although it will never ever acquire a definitive form.

BOYLAN: So we construct reality from nothing that already exists definitively, right? And we do so through the kind and quality of interactions we have. Does this apply to our identity, too?

Because, if that is the case, then, to return to Bourdieu's categories, we should in theory be free to *affiliate* with whatever culture we encounter, through an act of our will. Even if our community tries to *ascribe* us to the roles it assigned us at our birth, we are in theory free to co-construct a different identity by simply taking a trip and changing the community we interact with.

If this is your view, then it is, indeed, quite distant from Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, however one interprets it.

BENNETT: The constructivist view is that you cannot really avoid creating your own identity. The question is whether you are aware of that or not. Typically we operate in a group, we receive our socialization through a group, we maintain that pattern of behavior (which we call our culture) through interaction with people in the group, and we may – or may not – be aware that we are in the process of constructing all that. But once we become aware, then we can take charge of the process.

BOYLAN: One might criticize that view by saying "You think you are free, you think you are taking charge of constructing your identity, but in fact you are still being manipulated by your community." I gave you an example of that a minute ago, when I spoke of the 1968 American hippies who thought they were rebelling against their society but in reality were actually confirming the basic American values inculcated in them, by negating them or exacerbating them. These rebels were like strident atheists who, by getting so worked up, show they secretly feel god exists. It is though American society offered young people in the 1960's a certain number of both conformist and nonconformist menus to choose from, but those menus were, nonetheless, 100% stars and stripes – all of them.

BENNETT: Maybe we need to step back a little bit to the concept of freedom and free will. The assumption here that I'm making is really an essentially constructivist, Maturanian assumption: our view of the world is co-ontological (Maturana, 1978, [1988](#)) This means that we are in the process of both being constrained by and creating the constraints of the various fields or systems that we operate in.

BOYLAN: So does this mean that, if we travel to several different countries, thus operating in several different fields, we create different constraints in each one and thus form multiple identities?

BENNETT: Yes, but rather than using the term "multiple identities", I would use the term "multiple repertoires." If we take identity to be in the first place our *sense of affiliation* with a group, going back to that idea of ascription, we may or may not then choose to affiliate with a group we are ascribed to – we may simply wish to correct people about their assumptions regarding us. There are a lot of interesting issues deriving from this affiliation and ascription dyad, particularly regarding bi-racial people, adoptees, and other situations where you have somebody who does not, to put it simply, look like the kind of person one associates with a certain place or role: how do they handle that issue? And the reason I'm interested in it is because it raises the point: how does one maintain a given construction of identity? Especially in cross-cultural situations.

BOYLAN: I addressed that question in a paper of mine, "On being European" ([Boylan, 2006](#)): I look at how Europeans are trying to construct their common identity out of their fairly divergent national cultures, and raise the general question of how individuals manage that feat.

But you seem to be thinking of **highly** conflictual cross-cultural situations, like trying to operate in a culture where people live values that strongly contrast with one's native or chosen value system.

BENNETT: That's right. And so the issue really is: what "range" do you have? What kind of repertoire do you have that allows you to look at things in a variety of ways and, in this case, in the way of the society you find yourself in. All the while recognizing that all these things are constructed. So most hippies of 1968 probably had a limited range: they constructed a view of reality that was only somewhat different from that of their 1950's parents that they were rebelling against.

BOYLAN: Anyway, with hind sight, maybe we could say that the 1968 hippies, however rebellious they may have seemed then, were actually part of an overall emerging reality, a complex process involving all parts of that particular society. And they were being constructed as a "counterpoint" to the static 1950's society of their parents, by their society as a collective parent. Parents often have repressed needs or unfulfilled wishes that they unconsciously prod their children into living out... while disapproving of their behavior at the same

time! And that's how society progresses, through double binds. If we can call that progress.

BENNETT: If you want, you can take a Freudian or Batesonian (Bateson, 1969) view, but it's a more deterministic view, so you inevitably conclude that the combination of nature and nurture heavily determines people's behavior. But if you step aside from such a view, as I am trying to do in this interview, and take a constructivist view, then the question is not "How has your behavior been determined?" so much as it is "How are you participating in the on-going collective generation of a world view, or way of organizing the world?" And it may be that you are participating in some construction of the world that either pleases your parents or doesn't please your parents or appears to be the fulfillment of some counter-desire they might have. All of these things are explanations that we bring to bear on this underlying process of generating the world view... from a constructivist perspective.

BOYLAN: But can I go to another country whose values I don't really share – they are not in any of my repertoires and I feel no empathy toward them – and nonetheless get into their culture and construct an identity that is consonant with their culture? That's what I had the impression you were saying initially. "Everything's possible." Now you seem to limit that possibility by the number of repertoires one has, so in some cases it would be impossible to create an identity consonant with the culture one finds oneself in.

Empathy as the key to integration (and adaptation, too)

BENNETT: Let's move back a little bit because there are several assumptions embedded in your question. For instance, saying that you don't empathize, which implies that sometimes empathy is impossible. Well, that's a particular view of empathy, synonymous with liking or appreciating or willing to have like behavior. But you might use the term empathy in another way: being able to understand and thus "stand under" a particular organization of the world. That should **always** be possible.

BOYLAN: I agree that "empathy" is not just feeling an affective resonance for someone. That for me is the definition of "sympathy": you feel the joy or pain of another person. Instead, empathy for me is a volitional resonance, a gut complicity. That other person's *experience* of life becomes yours. That includes their feelings, of course, but also what they live for. And you need that kind of empathy in order to "stand under" another person's particular organization of the world, metaphorically wearing their banner, and do so sincerely.

So, for me, empathy is more than sympathy. And it is much more than just "understanding" another person. You can "understand" a person while remaining atop an ivory tower, neither affectively nor volitionally involved. This is mere cognitive resonance and it won't be enough to interact effectively with that person. Your words of solidarity, for example, will risk falling flat.

Because, to sound sincere, you will need to resonate with the other person “volitionally”, at gut level, feeling his or her cause as **your** cause. **That** for me is empathy. And since we can't command our gut reactions, perhaps we can't empathize with everyone and every culture. What do you think?

BENNETT: No, we should be able to... at least ideally. We should be able to look at the world placing ourselves in any potential perspective and some of those may be ways of looking at the world that we wouldn't choose to maintain for ourselves. Imagine, for example, a highly authoritarian society in which people's rights are heavily limited, where women are subjugated... it's easy to think of a lot of examples of societies in which you or I would not feel comfortable. But that doesn't mean that you can't effectively create a world-view – let's call it a facsimile world-view – that allows you to look at the world from that perspective. You can see perfectly that, from their standpoint, theirs is a perfectly good way of organizing the world.

BOYLAN: Yes, but that's not empathy, as I just defined it. That's “understanding”; that's looking at their world from an ivory tower, sharing their world view cognitively but not affectively nor, above all, volitionally. Which you would have to do in order to get into that society and make it part of your identity, so that you can engage effectively with the people there. Identities, like empathy, are not just cognitive realities. They are also affective: when you acquire a new identity, you come to like or dislike or laugh at certain things that you didn't like or dislike or laugh at before. And, above all, they are volitional: you come to want certain things, or shun certain things, or root for certain things that you did not want or shun or root for before. At least you do so for the time you choose to live that identity. And because empathy is visceral, you can't playact these things, people will detect your shallowness... unless you are a really good actor.

BENNETT: Then your question is: “Are we able to operate in a society that has a world view that includes **lived** values that we disagree with?” Is that the question you're asking?

BOYLAN: That's right. And I would add: “...lived values that we **strongly** disagree with, when we are in our native culture.” So what do you think? In such situations, can we add a new identity to our repertoire – cognitively, affectively and volitionally – without being hypocritical and without producing conflicts within us?

BENNETT: It depends on how integrated we are. Which raises the question of integration. Let's take as given that ALL of us are able to generate ANY possible world-view. We all have that latent potentiality, OK? This would therefore include the world-view of society X that you are traveling to. So how are you going to get along in X?

As you know from my work on the six-stage Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the last two stages suggest that there are two ways of doing that. One is called “Adaptation”: you maintain your own value position

but identify through a process of taking perspective, which is how I define empathy. But listen, it is **not** simply the cognitive empathy that you described. It is what I referred to, in my writings that go back to 1979, as "intuitive empathy", which is being able to organize the world almost to the extent of engaging in an embodiment of that perspective, such that you are able to generate appropriate behavior in that other cultural context ([Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004](#)).

Now I can do that, and be perfectly aware that I am doing that, and still continue to say that it is me, Milton Bennett with my native value system, who am operating from the standpoint of this other world-view. And this enables me to generate appropriate behavior which I do not consider to be "me", or rather that I consider to be "me" but in an extended sense. It's "me" being able to operate in a way different from the way I generally choose to operate. And that's what I call "Adaptation." I think it's a very highly developed and sophisticated skill.

And the only difference between that and the next stage, called Integration, is that with Integration, you do in fact see who you are as somebody different from who you were, as somebody who **wants** to do the things that are considered appropriate in the other culture. That's the volitional or gut side you were insisting on. Or at least you see yourself as somebody who is perhaps somewhat different from the locals but nonetheless able to do sincerely the things they do because you can want the kinds of things they want. (In addition, you can want things they would never dream of wanting, because you have within you your native identity as well; but you don't bring that aspect into the picture; it would only create confusion.)

So, at stage six (Integration), you begin to define your identity as that of a person living in an extended state, not just confined to your native state. Then the question is: "How do you integrate those various values that co-exist in that extended state and that come from living in entirely different cultures – values that are, in fact, in contrast with one another?" They may consist of even **highly** conflicting values, as you were suggesting.

Let's say, for example, that the society that you are currently operating in effectively believes that the role of women should be highly distinct from men whereas for the other society that you operate effectively in, your native society, the role of women should be interchangeable with that of men. Here I'm using that Hofstedian (Hofstede, 2001) masculine-feminine dimension just to simplify things. Well, that sets off a conflict, right? Or at least potentially.

But do you really need to decide that only one of those beliefs corresponds to reality? And that the other is a distorted view or a fabrication? If you feel you do, then you are an absolutist; you have a positivist, deterministic perspective. But even if you are a relativist, a strict relativist, even if you admit that **both** realities are fabrications or "points of view," you still haven't eliminated possible sources of conflict completely. Because it's like the idea of the elephant in the mind of each of the six blind men. For you, there is **some** way

in which things really **are** – you just have to be patient and keep on accumulating the various perspectives in order to get the whole picture. When finally you do, if you finally do, then you will have a picture of reality that you can call “right” and the other pictures in your mind, that you had previously accepted as possible alternative views, will be “wrong”. And there will be conflict.

But if you have a developmental, constructivist, Maturanian perspective, then there is no way you can ever claim to see “reality,” because it only exists as an on-going emergent quality of our transactions with events. You are never exposed to the possibility of inner conflict.

BOYLAN: So, whatever you see as a “reality” is not really there; “what is there” is in the process of becoming something that you cannot yet perceive as such. And, indeed, that you will never see as such, unless you live forever. And so this way of thinking permits you to accept everything as provisionally true or possible... “in a sense”. Because nothing is yet what it really “is” when it has totally emerged. And that will be, if we must fix a limit, at the end of time. Is this what you mean?

Well then, in this case, I guess nothing is impossible to accept... at least, momentarily. And that means you can indeed identify with and “be” anyone, in any society. This of course does not mean that you abandon completely your native identity and preferences; it simply means you do not assign an absolute value to them either, and thus can share other people's preferences whatever they are, even preferences that seem initially repulsive to you.

I have the impression that the current Pope would not subscribe to these views, Milton.

BENNETT: (Chuckle) Really?

BOYLAN: But actually, if you think about it, these views are **not** amoral. Because in the final analysis, one does make ethical choices. One does have a value system. One does not say “everything is the same to me.”

To make this point clear, I often give my students the example of musical preferences. If you like rock music exclusively and consider, for example, Italian opera repulsive and Moroccan gnawa music cacophonous, then you do not understand music. Because there is no one music that is “right.” But if you can hear the richness of opera and the power of gnawa, if you get to like to listen to both on occasion and neither seems cacophonous or repulsive any more, then you have ceased to be a musical absolutist or fundamentalist and have become a musical relativist or constructivist... maybe we could even say “interculturalist.” But... and here's the point... this is not to say that you have abandoned rock as your preference, as the music you listen to most often. You don't become a musical agnostic: you remain faithful to the U2 or whatever other rock band you identify most with. It is simply that now you have learned to hear all the other kinds of music as “true”, “beautiful”, “desirable to listen

to"... in a sense and on occasion. So you **do** have values; it's just that they're not mutually exclusive, fundamentalist values.

BENNETT: That's an interesting analogy. But you know, when I said that, if you have a constructivist perspective, then there is no way you can claim to see "reality" because it only exists as an on-going emergent quality of our transactions with events, I was not preaching agnosticism. I was not saying that people with a constructivist perspective do not believe in anything or that, for them, since everything is possible, anything goes. Not at all. I was simply saying that such people have learned to see things as constantly developing, so they don't pigeon-hole them. But, of course, they have preferences and take a stance in life; we all do! They just don't give their preferences and their stances an absolute value, as fundamentalists do. For example, they don't burn unbelievers at the stake!

BOYLAN: Or bomb and occupy their countries, in order to bring them democracy or save their women folk from oppression. They believe there are other ways to share values and get them accepted. And I agree.

BENNETT: Yes, there are usually many other ways and much more effective ones.

BOYLAN: Besides, there's something we have forgotten to add: one always has a "back door entry" if one cannot possibly accept a given behavior in a given culture – say, the stoning of adulterers in Saudi Arabia, should one decide to live there. Instead of identifying with the stereotypical member of that culture who approves of stoning, one can identify with the non-stereotypical members, the ones who do not approve and yet are part of that culture. As I said about American hippies in the 1960's, all societies offer both conformist and non-conformist menus for their members to choose from. So, in this case, one can identify with a militant Saudi dissident – provided one accepts the risks. In not, one can always identify with one of the mainstream Saudis who disapprove of stoning, yet are not persecuted because they do so for Saudi (Muslim) reasons in Saudi (artful) ways. This provides an easier point of entry into that culture. One does not seek to Westernize one's hosts, one simply sides with mainstream dissenters who seek change from within.

From theory to practice

BOYLAN: Now, let's look at all this from a practical standpoint, from the standpoint of a company IC trainee or coachee. Up to now we have talked of the difficulty of assimilating other cultures that seem initially unacceptable because they contrast with our deeply felt native values, as in this last example.

But actually, when you think about it, company executives often have just as much difficulty in living in and accepting cultures that are, in fact, very similar to their own.

I'm thinking of Italian managers. In my company training (which often includes helping trainees interact effectively in English), I encounter many managers who refuse to learn to speak English in a British or American way; they feel they are Italian and want to speak it in an Italian way. Talking like a Brit or a Yank seems false to them. And I encounter the same problems if I try to get them to adapt to British or American linguistic norms in view of a trip abroad; they don't want to learn to call their American counterpart "Bob", they want to call him Dr. Smith or Engineer Smith or whatever his qualification is, even if everyone else in the company calls that person Bob. Doing things the American way or the British way seems hypocritical to them. And vice versa for many British or American managers who are assigned to work in Italy. I find the same resistances.

So let's leave aside the difficulties of living in cultures that condone stoning. Let's tackle the seemingly easier problem of how to get British top executives sent to Naples off their high horse and into acceptance of local ways, or Italian top executives into a frame of mind where they're willing to construct a new identity and acquire speaking habits that are consonant with British culture.

BENNETT: First of all, let me say that whenever we use cross-cultural examples in IC work, we use them in prototypical ways rather than in culture specific ways. In addition, if you're looking at cultural divergences, it really doesn't matter what cultural difference you're looking at. So you're right: I mentioned possible conflicts in prototypical East-West relations but I could just as easily have mentioned two neighboring European cultures. As for your examples of Italian and British managers' difficulties in adjusting culturally to each other, I would certainly agree it's a challenge, as in the case of any two cultures.

That said, I wouldn't set my task as a trainer or coach in those terms. I would start out by avoiding telling the managers that they need to construct a new, more inclusive identity. I would also avoid setting the goal of "decentring" ([Boylan, 2003](#)) as you do with your university language students who are undoubtedly much more receptive. I would, instead, define our work together as increasing the managers' repertoire of behavior. A simple example that I sometimes use in those contexts is to ask managers if they communicate in the same way with their spouses as they do with their grandparents...

BOYLAN: ...or their children...or the Reverend Pastor of their church...

BENNETT: ...yes, and so the managers will say: "No, we use different styles." And so I ask them: "Are you being more real using one style than in using the other?" They inevitably reply "No, it's still me" and so I point out that they have repertoires. Now, I tell them, our task is simply to widen your repertoires (Bennett, 2001).

BOYLAN: Yes, but the affective-volitional issues still remain. While these executives may accept their grandparents, their children and even their pastor,

they may not accept, at gut level, overly reserved Brits or overly friendly Americans, whom they may find "*antipatici*", dislikeable. Thus, when interacting with them, they will instinctively avoid accommodating to them and remain the Italian manager they are normally. So do you have any tricks to get them to make that leap into the other party's cultural world?

BENNETT: As you well know, all of this is a developmental issue. So no leaps. You have to give them time to develop the perceptual infrastructure, as I call it, the ability to organize the intercultural dimension of their worlds. In addition, people need to develop a good level of sophistication (cultural awareness, for example) in order to do that. It's like every other developmental process – for example, the one described by Piaget (1936) for children. Once you have established a certain number of discriminations that allow you to handle change in a reasonably sophisticated way, this mental framework then allows you to move from your current state X over to a new state Y. So, no, there is no particular trick in getting people to do that, but there is a particular level of perceptual organization that this hypothetical manager we're talking about would need to have, in order to accept or adapt to or even integrate into the other culture.

And that would include a perception of his or her own Italian value system as – and again, let me make this distinction – not just "relative" but "emergent". He has to see that he has not just a *habitus* that has been foisted on him and that he can't easily get out of, but a world-view that is emerging and that can be what he chooses to make it be, because – in spite of appearances – it is not yet fully determined. Especially in today's global, multiethnic Italy, "being an Italian" can mean many things, and the number of different things will only increase with time. So it's his choice.

Of course, when you have managers who are pretty dedicated to the defense of their own world, that's going to take time. Because those defenses have the advantage of giving the subject a strong sense of identity, albeit monocultural and ethnocentric. So unless such a person sees the advantages and, especially, the safety of moving out of that defensive position, they're pretty much going to maintain it.

BOYLAN: So your training or coaching aims at making them feel safe in putting to one side their native identity.

BENNETT: Yes, it's a push-pull situation. The push frequently dominates but that's not always very successful for the kind of managers we just mentioned. The pull would be getting them to evaluate if they are effective with foreign clients and if their colleagues, who are less rigid in their maintenance of identity, seem to be more effective in such intercultural situations.

BOYLAN: But, even with time, many trainees or coachees will never get to stage five or six on your scale.

BENNETT: Right, adaptation or integration are not questions that these individuals are pursuing or ready to pursue; and the more that you or I try to push them by saying "Hey, here is what you need to do" and putting it into terms of identity-change or integration, the more mystified at best these people are going to be. More likely they will simply retort: "What you're saying is not relevant to me so get out of here!" And they'd be right!

BOYLAN: Yes, well, I try to show them, besides reviewing the culture clashes they have inevitably suffered (otherwise they would not have called me in for training or coaching in the first place), the **missed** opportunities they and their company have suffered because of insufficient entente with their non-Italian clients.

BENNETT: Yes, but that probably comes over as push, too. You need to get them to consider the pull, what is it that allows them to move out of their current position, which in many other ways serves them well, to a position that I would classify as stage three, minimization. The person needs to see that minimizing differences is more than political correctness, it's a way of expanding their sense of the complexity of humanity.

BOYLAN: OK, but once they learn to at least minimize differences, why not take it to the hilt and encourage them to attain integration as a way of really augmenting their sense of the complexity of humanity? You seem dubious about the value of attaining that highest stage.

BENNETT: I don't believe that the DMIS is teleological. For a lot of people who are operating routinely in another culture, it could be useful for them to consider integration. But let's also consider an alternative to integration, adaptation.

As you know, the term "integration" in the DMIS does not refer to social issues, but rather how much one can act with integrity. And if somebody routinely operates across two different cultural frames of reference in which there are a lot of seemingly contradictory elements, then that person probably needs to spend some time trying to integrate those things if they want to maintain their integrity. To integrate means to reconcile them with one another, so that operating from both those frames of reference can work for them. In other words, it can permit them to operate with integrity and not hypocritically, it can permit them to be integrated as opposed to disintegrated. Disintegrated means fragmented, having little enclaves, little air-tight categories. A disintegrated person might say: "OK, now I'm finished being my Italian self, I'll start being my British self; OK, that's done, now back to my Italian self."

So, to explain the two different choices in a nutshell, at stage five, adaptation, what the Italian manager we're talking about needs to be able to do, if he decides to get that far, is to say: "I'm this Italian and here's the way I like being and this is who I am... but I can **also** behave in this British way, not unlike talking to my grandmother."

Whereas at the sixth stage, integration, he would say: "I'm Italian but I'm routinely operating in this British context, half of my time is with Brits, so how do I handle that, without continually flip-flopping back and forth?" He might even be married to a British woman and have children: so how does he help his kids develop an identity that is respectful of themselves, in both their British and their Italian manifestations? These are his goals if he chooses to get to the sixth stage.

BOYLAN: So he has to avoid – and help his children avoid – having bits and pieces of himself/themselves that are little islands, cut off from each other. This reminds me of the clinical description of multiple personality disorder (MPD), although it is admittedly an over abused construct (Putnam, 1989). A subject with MPD seems to be, at different moments, two different people, with distinct identities and ways of interacting with the environment and with little memory of the other identity. That's going too far. And in fact, when you think of it, that is **not** stage six integration at all – precisely because the two spheres do not merge into a single whole, as they do in successful multiple reenactments of the self (McLeod, 1998).

Stage six integration, in my understanding of it, means you have a single but composite identity; so you are not playacting when you talk to a Brit as a Brit and to an Italian as an Italian, you are simply being yourself, mindful that, like a sophisticated pipe organ, you have various registers you can switch over to when playing.

Whereas at stage five, adaptation, in my opinion you **are** playacting.

BENNETT: I beg to differ. I don't think that you're playacting any more than you are in any situation in which you are behaving authentically in a way that is not the way you normally behave.

BOYLAN: But at stage five, you don't really believe in the values you are choosing to display. Whereas with integration, the highest stage, you do believe in those values because you have worked out a way to reconcile them with the other values of your composite identity.

BENNETT: No, I really don't think the difference is whether you believe it or not. I think the difference is whether or not you incorporate it into yourself. With integration you incorporate; you say: "This is who I am, I am a person who is sometimes this way and sometimes that way." You define your identity precisely as the constellation of those differences and your personality as the way you navigate among them. Whereas at stage five, adaptation, you take the perspective of the person who is culturally diverse from you, for example you as an American take a Brit as your model, and you allow British style behavior to be generated, that is, to come forth intuitively from your embodied sense of British culture. I don't believe that is playacting. I believe that is just as authentic as any other behavior is.

So there is a difference between being able to operate authentically from a particular cultural perspective (stage five) and operating authentically in an extended state with an extended repertoire and to define your identity in those terms (stage six).

Integration on a macro level

BOYLAN: Let me touch on one last issue.

You mentioned that the concept of integration has a social dimension. We can certainly see it on a macro level every day in the newspaper. The French, for example, have their particular way of integrating their various ethnic communities: everyone is expected to share the same basic values because, it is claimed, these values are "real", they correspond to what Reason dictates. Thus Muslim women cannot choose to wear a burka since that violates what is held to be the universal concept of women's rights. So what is your take on this French policy of integration? Does it not reduce multiculturalism to monoculturalism and thus negate the very possibility of intercultural exchange? As well as negating the possibility of integration as you define it at level six for individuals, since that would require creating a shared ethos in which various, even contrasting, repertoires can be lived and expressed alongside each other?

BENNETT: Yes, I tend to agree with that. It's an assimilationist policy and I doubt whether it will work any better than the "melting pot" policy in the United States – which has been mythologized after the fact.

BOYLAN: True, it no longer exists – if it ever did.

BENNETT: Yes, and even if it did exist to some extent, it was not very successful then. It may have muted the distinctions between some European groups – which are now trying to re-establish those distinctions.

BOYLAN: Well, the "melting pot" is still Sarkozy's goal and now apparently Angela Merkel's as well in Germany. On October 19th, 2010, she declared that multiculturalism had been a failure in Germany and so, in the future, greater linguistic and cultural integration would be demanded of all inhabitants. This means that the Turks in Kreuzberg will have to acquire a German identity and exhibit that.

BENNETT: You know, all organizations – from societies down to multicultural teams in companies – have to face the issue of reconciling unity and diversity. They need to figure out how to obtain focus and yet, at the same time, make diversity work for them. Pretty much everybody agrees that diversity is the fuel for innovation. Unfortunately both societies and groups tend to make the same error: they go too far. The pendulum swings in the direction of unity and they respond in chorus by saying "Let's all be the same!" as in France and now Germany; then the pendulum swings back in the direction of diversity and they say, like for instance in Canada and in some places in the U.S., "Every view is

sacrosanct and nobody should have to adapt to anybody”, thus maintaining enclaves. Both of these positions are unworkable: you can't force people into a “unity”. Indeed, Hofstede among others has pointed out how people tend even to accentuate their differences in such circumstances. As for enclaves, they block society-wide communication and exacerbate differences. But how to reconcile the need for diversity with the need for unity? The society that figures that out will be the most successful. It will be a society in which people maintain their distinctness as their heritage identity, and at the same time participate in a common, “national” identity that unites them with the other groups, guarantees communication, and makes differences acceptable ([Bennett, 2004](#)).

BOYLAN: Yes, that's how the composite identity we were talking about before, at stage six, works in individuals. Well, do you know of any such societies?

BENNETT: I said that, in some places in the United States, the pendulum has swung too far towards diversity, while we all know from newspaper accounts that in other areas it has swung too far towards unity. That said, there are still other regions where I think the composite identity model you mentioned has worked fairly successfully, although even there you could argue that there is a backlash going on now.

However I'm not sure it is specifically about multiculturalism; there are other issues at stake. Like “What narrative is going to be the prevailing narrative about who we are?”

Culture, in fact, is nothing but the narrative about who we are, the narrative we accept. And it changes as the constituency of the group changes. And that produces reaction from people who become distressed that things aren't the way they “always” were. They perceive that their identity narrative is changing and the reason it is changing is because there is a change in the constituency that is generating that narrative. That's what's going on in the United States now. And in Germany, France... and also in Italy, for that matter. There is an impending change in the narrative of who we are, because who we are is, in fact, changing.

BOYLAN: Aptly said. And, speaking of Italy, that reminds me of a recipe book, just out, from a small Bolognese publishing house. It's called “Ricette delle nuove famiglie d'Italia” (Cucci, 2010), “Recipes from the new families of Italy”, and consists of an interview of 24 families you wouldn't have found in Italy a generation ago, at least not so widely or not so openly, plus the recipes, with photos, of their favorite dishes. These “families” are principally mixed marriages – Italians with Albanian, Chinese, Moroccan or Ukrainian spouses, etc. – but also de facto families like gay or lesbian partners, one from the countryside with its culinary traditions, the other from the city and used to fast food; students cohabiting with workers; Italian university researchers who have lived and done research (and learned to cook) in various countries and who are now sharing a flat and cooking together back in Italy. The “fusion cuisine” that these new families have come up with is absolutely delicious,

according to the bloggers I've read, while being neither stereotypically Italian cuisine nor the posh International Cuisine you find in five star hotels.

Since Italians have traditionally maintained their identity through their food, this book and its singular culinary narrative tell us that a new Italy is taking shape, hardly without our noticing it. How's that for a tangible, even edible, example of a developmental "emerging" reality? As well as stage six cultural integration!

BENNETT: You've got my mouth watering!

BOYLAN: I bet! Well, Milton, thanks so much for the interview.

BENNETT: My pleasure.

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