Reflections on the contribution of intercultural understanding to race equality teaching

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This article is prompted by discussions arising from workshops with teachers in England around the OFSTED requirement of preparing pupils for 'Life in Modern Britain' with a focus on diversity. Drawing on the field of intercultural communication, which seeks to take the understanding of different cultures – including one's own – far beyond a tokenistic, single story approach, this article describes the underlying theories and continuing professional development (CPD) or classroom activities that begin to address some key questions, such as:

- What is culture?

- How can pupils be supported to become more interculturally competent?

- When does a cultural generalization become a stereotype?

- How can teachers best meet the needs of culturally diverse pupils?

The article mirrors a learning journey by staff at the Development Education Centre, South Yorkshire (DECSY), together with staff and students in the School of Languages and Cultures (SLC) at the University of Sheffield.

For three decades, DECSY has worked with local authority Multicultural and Ethnic Minority Achievement services, developed a Cultural Mentor Service (see Baldock, 2010 and Garvey *et al.*, 2007), taken part in Comenius inclusion and diversity projects (e.g. Sacoor, 2014) and engaged in debates and training to unpack equalities, community cohesion and, most recently, so-called 'Fundamental British Values' (Home Office, 2011). For several years the Centre has collaborated with the SLC to host internships for Masters' students in intercultural communication. This has helped

inform its practice, particularly in the context of a perceived need to move beyond 'contending educational theories of multicultural and antiracist education' in light of the 'complex contemporary situation of Britain's racial minorities' (Modood and May, 2001).

In the field of intercultural communication a broad distinction is made between 'culture' as something people *have* and something people *do*. People new to the field commonly consider culture to be something we have. Figure 1 visualizes the position of culture in an identity triangle, where culture occupies a space between biological human nature – aspects of which are shared with other animals – and the unique, part-genetic, part-learned individual personality. However, as we try to describe any cultural group, our ability to really define it slips away from us – any individual is more than a description of cultural characteristics, and any member of a group is not the same as another member of that group. The lines become fuzzy as we try to identify such characteristics, and it becomes helpful to think of cultural practices: what we *do*.
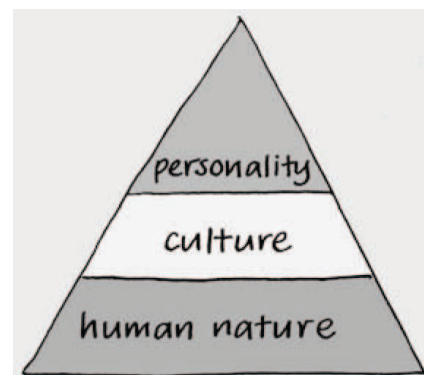

Figure 1: Identity Triangle (After Hofstede, 1991, illustration by Teresa Robertson with kind permission of © British Council)
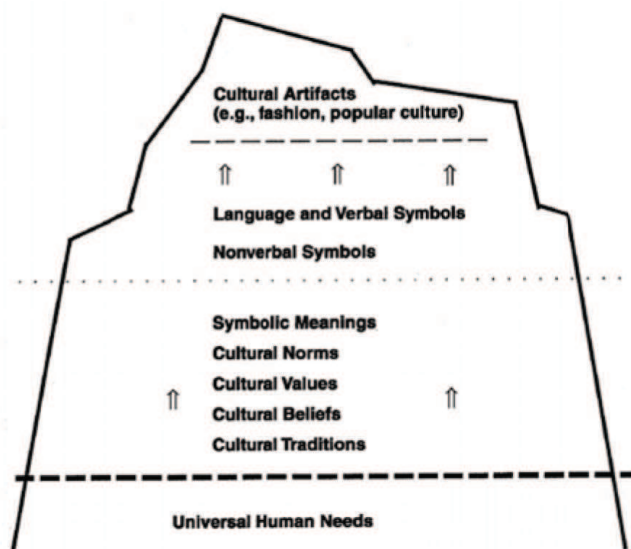
There are many ways to introduce culture as something we *have* in a classroom or professional development context. Activity suggestions are provided throughout this article.

Activity one: Ask the group to imagine that because of extreme flooding they have to evacuate their homes and move far away where new homes are available. Participants are asked, 'what five objects, apart from essentials like a mobile phone, would you take with you to help you remember important aspects of your life?' This can be run as a communal activity where the five objects are first chosen individually, then as a pair, four, eight, sixteen and eventually as a whole class to form a collection to represent the whole migrating community. This can lead to a discussion of what's included and what's left out, and the limitations of trying to capture the culture of a whole group, and of doing so on the basis of objects.

Activity two: the students have to try to identify the contents of their invisible back-pack (or cultural baggage). This allows for explicit inclusion of abstract items like norms, experiences and values (see The Linking Network website, http://thelinkingnetwork.org.uk). One of the aims of this activity, as with the objects activity, is to help get across the idea that everyone carries with them a plethora of cultural identifications.

The hidden aspects of culture are sometimes visualized as an iceberg (see Figure 2), where many aspects are hidden from view so it can be easy to assume that others think, and feel, the same way as we do. Schein (1992), working in particular with organizational cultures, argues that we're likely to feel most comfortable with people who share the same set of basic assumptions because of a desire for cognitive stability. Conversely, 'any challenge or questioning of a basic assumption will release anxiety and defensiveness.' Crucially, it is this willingness and ability to decentre from our own assumptions that is considered one core ability of intercultural competence.

Cultural Artifacts (e.g., fashion, popular culture)

⇑   ⇑   ⇑

Language and Verbal Symbols

Nonverbal Symbols

Symbolic Meanings
Cultural Norms
Cultural Values
Cultural Beliefs
Cultural Traditions

⇑   ⇑

Universal Human Needs

(Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 10).

Figure 2: Cultural Iceberg

Activity three: The visual analogy with an iceberg can be used to create a sorting activity. The words written on cards denoting cultural aspects – like clothing, greetings, food, values and assumptions about time – can be placed on a large picture of an iceberg. Students respond to the question 'what's my iceberg?', and then share their responses with others.

It can be difficult for school students from the dominant cultural background to develop openness to the perspectives of others. One conceptualization of this that comes from intercultural communication is Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). This shows a continuum from ethnocentrism, where one's own culture is seen as central to reality, to ethno-relativism, where other cultures are recognized as alternative, viable organizations of reality (Figure 3).

Denial → Defence → Minimization → Acceptance → Adaptation → Integration

E T H N O C E N T R I S M   E T H N O R E L A T I V I S M

Figure 3: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, Bennett (1986)

The first three of Bennett's six stages – denial, defence and minimization – are ethnocentric orientations that deny, show hostility towards or minimize difference. Denial is most common where people grow up with little or no encounter with people who are significantly culturally different from themselves.

Activity four: Raising cultural awareness through the provision of food, music, clothing, events characteristic of various cultures – e.g. visiting a Hindu temple during Diwali – can be a starting point for recognizing difference. When a person who is in defence recognizes difference, they see it as a threat to their own worldview. This might be expressed through overtly hostile statements and negative stereotyping towards other cultural groups, or through trying to prove the superiority of their own culture – as evident from the increase in xenophobic attacks in the UK and US since Brexit and Trump's election victory.

Activity five: Emphasizing the commonality, and especially the positive features, of cultures and human beings can help those in this stage. For example, students could look for common features, experiences or needs in their backpacks (activity two) or personal icebergs (activity three).

Minimization occurs when similarities are emphasized over differences. People from all cultural backgrounds are assumed to share the same universal characteristics – almost always based on the cultural perspective of the person making the assumption. This resembles what has been termed a 'colour blind' approach (e.g. Carr, 1997).

Activity six: Assisting people who are in this stage to become more aware of their own culture, especially its 'basic underlying assumptions', can help them stop assuming that everyone sees the world in the way they do. Drama games can be helpful, such as hot-seating, where the aim is to develop empathy for the perspectives of others. The student sits on a chair for about 3 minutes, telling someone else's story – and possibly answering questions – from that person's perspective (it could be, say, the *Big Issue* seller seen on the way to school, the bus driver, or a well-known figure such as Muhammad Ali).

Acceptance, the first of the ethno-relative stages, occurs when the existence of cultural difference is accepted as a necessary and preferable human condition. During this stage respect is developed for behavioural and value differences in other cultures, and the person is best supported by being given practical opportunities to apply their understanding through real experiences of intercultural communication.

Activity seven: DECSY has run linking projects where children from neighbouring primary schools, which serve culturally different catchments, have come to learn about and from each other by exchanging letters and through shared activities and games and

philosophical enquiries (Belgeonne, 2017). For more information on school linking, visit the Linking Network website. The last two stages are illustrated by increasing cross-cultural empathy and the ability to shift into two or more different cultural worldviews. This is often found in children of mixed heritage or those who have lived in cultures different from their own for extended periods of time. Cohen-Emerique (1989) recognizes that decentring – or becoming aware of one's own reference framework – and discovering the other's reference framework are also important for true intercultural dialogue to take place.

Colleagues of Somali heritage working on the 'Who Am I?' project (Rick *et al.*, 2007) were keen to impress upon non-Somali teachers the importance of being aware of how offensive certain mainstream British beckoning gestures appear to Somali children. They gave an example of a teacher telling a Somali child: 'Look at me when I'm talking to you!' But the child may not do this, as looking directly in the eyes of a person of higher status would be considered disrespectful and rude. Hall (1959) describes the world of non-verbal communication in detail, including the differing cultural attitudes towards space and time that may be expressed in behaviour.

Activity eight: A simple activity to highlight non-verbal communication is to give out written instructions to participants who are then required to talk in pairs about a simple subject such as 'what do you think of this room as a training venue' (Blohm, 1997). The instructions might include examples drawn from actual behaviours like: 'Don't look directly into the eyes of the speaker', 'don't jump in before the other speaker has finished a sentence to add your own points.' In the debriefing, participants can share their feelings about the experience and what the implications might be.

An anthropological approach to culture focuses on smaller, specific cultural groups, and uses tools like participant observation to describe behaviour (Martin and Nakayama, 2010). As global interdependence increases, cultures exist less in isolation, cultural hybridities are more common and people may need to navigate more sensitively between contexts. One aspect of someone's identity may become more salient when confronted with particular contrasts in a certain situation (e.g. 'I feel more/less British/Black/Polish/Muslim when ...'). Cultures are recognized as dynamic and are 'continually being redefined by individuals and groups as they interact ... or respond to changing circumstances' (Byram *et al.*, 2009). Those who have an intercultural orientation will not only seek to understand difference, they will involve the 'transformation of students' identities in the act of learning' (Scarino, 2010). The enquiries based on the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach that have taken place as part of DECSY's local linking projects have elicited reflective comments from participating students that indicate that transformation of this nature might be taking place. Before: [Do] 'they think I'm odd the same way I think they are? What do you think is strange about me?' Same student, after link: 'They were Muslim and dark, I Christian and white. We are [all] people and they're not strange like I thought' (Unwin, 2010).

Critical approaches (e.g. Hall, 1980) recognize the importance of unequal power relationships. For example, the words 'immigrant' and 'expatriate' are both used to describe a person living in a country they have moved to, but the choice of word can depend on the person's socioeconomic status and the host country's perception of the person's country of origin (Guilherme, 2012). Such an approach can unsettle unexamined assumptions, questioning, for example, how a school or education system might impose dominant arbitrary cultural practices as the norm that determines how the competence of all children is evaluated (Guilherme, 2012). Miike (2003) and Asante (1990) question the western or Eurocentric nature of the whole field of study, suggesting that an Asian- or African-centred perspective

would look quite different. And Hoskins and Sallah (2011) argue for the need to explicitly develop young people's vocabulary for talking about issues of power, privilege and social justice.

Rather than advocating any single approach to culture, Martin and Nakayama (2010) suggest using a dialectic lens that encompasses considering: an individual's personality and also, at the same time, their culture, both the person *and* the context or role they may be enacting, both similarities *and* differences between cultures, both static *and* dynamic aspects of culture, both the past and the present and both privilege and disadvantage – and how one may be the reality in one context but not in another.

Shirley (2016) suggests that intercultural communication can be valuable for both teachers and students, particularly in schools with diverse populations, and can help in relation to communicating with parents and with supporting pupils to be 'buddies' to newly arrived children. It can also make people more self-reflective. Teachers in the study felt that awareness of differences in non-verbal communication, and having some understanding of students' backgrounds, could help 'stop you putting your foot in it' (Shirley, 2016). They saw the curriculum as playing an important role in building an understanding of difference.

Tentative recommendations for schools arise from this article. They include:

■ ensuring that students and teachers are aware that everyone has cultural identifications and becomes able to acknowledge them in themselves, and their associated taken-for-granted assumptions or ways of seeing the world (activities 1–3)

■ ensuring that teachers are aware of the educational strategies to use that best suit the students' degree of ethnocentricity (activities 4–7)

■ Holding one's own cultural assumptions lightly and considering the range of dialectics to take into account – as described by Martin and Nakaya (2010). Model this approach with pupils and staff.

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