# Formative Journeys of First-Year College Students:

# Tensions and Intersections with Intercultural Theory*

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Development of intercultural skills is recognized as an essential outcome of a college education, but in order to facilitate students' growth effectively, we must understand the points of the developmental journey at which students enter the college classroom. This study tests four hypotheses developed on the basis of leading models of intercultural development in relation to first-year students' levels of maturity, attitudes towards difference, capacity for productive interaction, and emotions experienced in the face of difference.

To test the hypotheses, we collected written narratives on a formative encounter with difference from 414 incoming students at the University of Minnesota. Each narrative was coded for an initial, intermediate or advanced stage of intercultural development, as well as for the outcomes of the interaction and emotions experienced in the course of the encounter. Findings indicate that: 1) Only 21% of respondents display evidence of ethnorelative thinking; 2) The majority report very positive attitudes towards difference, but show evidence of veiled detachment and minimization; 3) There is no difference in reports of productive interaction between those who do and do not display mindfulness; 4) The emotions experienced at various stages of intercultural maturity do not yield a pattern of increasing comfort. We conclude that the points at which our students begin their intercultural journey may differ slightly from what is suggested by leading developmental models, and recommend adjusting the starting point of programming aimed at supporting intercultural competence development in college.

**Introduction**

In the 21st century, a student's progress along the continuum of intercultural development is increasingly recognized as an essential outcome of a college education. Faculty, student development professionals, institutional leaders, and various community stakeholders recognize the priority of helping undergraduate students acquire the interpersonal skills needed to work productively with people of different cultures (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

In a recent Jossey-Bass ASHE higher education report series (Lee, Poch, Shaw & Williams, 2012), we proposed a conceptual and practical road map for supporting students' intercultural development by engaging the increasing diversity of college classrooms. We suggested that in order to help students along, we must begin where they are when they enter our classrooms. Research literature leaves little doubt that understanding the stage of intercultural development at which students come in to college is crucial for assisting their continued growth during the undergraduate years (Bowman & Brandenburger, 2012). In the course of writing the book, however, we became aware of how little is known about the stages of intercultural development at which students come to college, or the relevance of intercultural theory to the undergraduate experience.

Current models of intercultural development can provide useful frameworks for determining the appropriate starting point, but these models must also be applied and adapted to the actual capabilities and stances that our students bring to the classroom. This study extends previous research on intercultural development in college by examining the formative experiences of one large cohort of first-year students, and analyzes how their experiences align or diverge from current models of intercultural development.

*Urgent Need for Data on Incoming College Students*

Sustained and frequent opportunities to interact with difference are essential in the process of learning to expand one's frame of reference – which is in turn postulated as essential for effective and appropriate communication across cultures (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006). For many young people, the college years offer the first serious opportunity for sustained and substantive interaction with diverse others. Yet the mere presence of diversity is not sufficient for intercultural skills to be developed. In fact, exposure to people of different groups and cultures can sometimes reinforce stereotypes, especially if it is accompanied by a sense of anxiety and threat (Pettigrew, 2008).

As Gudykunst (2005) has argued, developing intercultural competence involves the appropriate management of the uncertainty and anxiety that inevitably accompany encounters with strangers. For a person to develop skills necessary to communicate effectively across cultural difference, his or her level of uncertainty and anxiety needs to be high enough to motivate interaction, but must not pass a critical threshold at which defensive mechanisms are activated. The critical threshold is passed when predicting the behavior of others is impossible, and anxiety gets in the way of productive interaction (Gudykunst, 2005).

The levels of students' readiness for intercultural growth depend largely on earlier encounters with diversity and the way they made sense of those encounters. If those who teach college courses and plan campus activities are not mindful of incoming students' thresholds of anxiety, the young people's encounters with diversity in college can actually result in sustained

bias. This study is motivated by the recognition that the potential of diverse classrooms will only be realized if students' thresholds of uncertainty and anxiety in college are neither missed nor exceeded.

### *Study Objectives*

The aim of this study is to examine to what extent the most influential assumptions of intercultural theory fit the experiences of first-year college students. It is guided by the belief that resolving any apparent discontinuities can lead to a more robust theory, which can in turn guide practitioners in classroom practice.  Therefore, we seek to accomplish two goals:

1. Provide an empirically-based illustration of the range of developmental stages represented by first-year students upon arriving at college;
2. Critically examine existing models of intercultural competence as analytic lenses for student experiences captured using the kind of qualitative methodologies postulated by intercultural experts.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses

Developmental models of intercultural competence assume that as people gain experience with representatives of other cultures, their developmental path follows along predictable stages characterized by increasing capacity for intercultural interaction. Such capacity is conceptualized as either intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986; Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003) or intercultural maturity (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005). While the two concepts differ in their emphasis, they both describe the quality of an individual's response to people from other cultures, which is assumed to determine that individual's capacity for successful interaction.

Our hypotheses regarding the intercultural competence of first-year university students draw on three influential models – the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986), Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005).  Rooted in decades of research on intercultural competence and developmental psychology, these models inform professional development and programming in the area of student development. They also share common assumptions that this study seeks to test and examine with regard to the first-year undergraduate population.

### *Common Assumptions of Leading Developmental Models*

### *An ethnocentric start*

As Bennett (1993) notes, the ability to relate to people of other cultures is not natural, as evidenced by the conflict that has accompanied cross-cultural contact throughout history. Therefore, a natural beginning of the intercultural journey is an ethnocentric stage where knowledge is categorical, and difference that is perceived to challenge one's existing norms is typically resisted.  Movement beyond ethnocentrism requires sustained and reflective engagement with people or ideas representing heterogeneous perspectives and values (Deardorff, 2006).

First-year college students in the United States offer a particularly interesting case for examining the stages of intercultural development. Not unlike other country contexts, students entering colleges in the U.S. may experience their first sustained and frequent encounters with individuals whom they perceive to be different (Saenz, 2010). Despite the demographic diversity of the nation, it cannot be taken for granted that students entering universities have prior experience interacting with difference given the continued socioeconomic and racial/ethnic segregation in U.S. neighborhoods (Orfield & Lee, 2006). Therefore, in spite of the diverse demographics of our sample population of first-year college students, we hypothesize that they are likely to be intercultural novices.

> **Hypothesis 1.** The majority of first-year respondents will be novices to intercultural engagement.

According to Brown (2008), developmental models assume that "the intercultural pathway is characterized by increasingly complex constructions of difference" (p. 52). Improved intercultural competence is therefore dependent not just on sustained contact with diverse others, but also on the depth of one's reflective process surrounding difference. All three developmental models referenced in this study assume that the potential for learning to communicate across difference grows with the depth and complexity of one's experience with cultural differences (Bennett, 1986; King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005).

The three developmental models suggest that individuals in early stages are likely to have ethnocentric worldviews that may remain implicit and unconscious. Students who arrive at college in initial stages of intercultural maturity are therefore likely to minimize, compare, or simplify difference in a way that preferences familiar values with which they are already comfortable (Bennett, 1986; King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005).

> **Hypothesis 2.** First-year respondents will demonstrate defensiveness or detachment towards perceived difference in describing intercultural encounters.

*Shift towards ethnorelativism*

A pivotal point in the intercultural journey involves learning to accept differences and recognize multiple perspectives as valid (Bennett, 1986; Deardorff, 2006; King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005). This move beyond ethnocentrism requires sustained and reflective engagement with heterogeneous people or ideas perspectives (Deardorff, 2006). The transition can occur over a relatively short period of exposure to people of different cultures, races, and beliefs; or it may take years of developing one's cultural self-awareness. Models of developing cultural self-awareness differ, but scholars agree that reflective mindfulness of one's own culture and the cultures of others is critical for developing interpersonal skills (Bennett, 1986; Deardorff, 2006). Effectiveness in interpersonal interactions follows an intrapersonal consciousness of the contextual forces that shaped one's own identity, and how those might differ from the forces that shaped others (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005). The internal change paves the way for external outcomes, such as effective and appropriate communication.

The three models posit that the intrapersonal transformation from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism and the attending growth in cultural self-awareness is a critical step towards developing interpersonal skills (Bennett, 1986; Deardorff, 2006). All of the models suggest that

an individual's ability to reflect upon one's knowledge, relationships, and identity is key to intercultural maturity.  As this shift occurs, world views become more complex and multi-faceted, which in turn enables individuals to engage in productive communication with diverse others (Bennett, 1986; Deardorff, 2006; King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005).

> **Hypothesis 3.**  First-year respondents whose reflections display mindfulness will be more likely to report productive interpersonal exchange than respondents whose reflections do not display mindfulness.

*Emotional trajectory*

Third, developmental models recognize that intercultural development is not a merely cognitive process, but it involves deep emotions (Deardorff, 2006; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Encountering people of different groups or cultures is often accompanied by a positive sense of curiosity, but also by anxiety. When people are faced with cultural differences in others, they experience a high degree of uncertainty (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). The path towards intercultural maturity is thus inevitably associated with the presence of discomfort.  However, as individuals develop more tools to deal with anxiety and uncertainty, differences begin to be seen as less threatening , individuals are likely to feel more at ease and ready to engage that which is different (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

At the point of transition into college, students' emotional response to new and unfamiliar surroundings is likely to be mediated by the level of intercultural maturity developed in the course of earlier experiences (Haines, 2007). Many college freshmen experience some uncertainty when encountering diverse strangers, but the ability to manage one's own level of anxiety will likely be less for individuals who had not had many previous opportunities to interact with people of different groups, or had their stereotypes reinforced in the course of earlier interactions.

> **Hypothesis 4.**  Respondents at the novice stage of intercultural development will associate intercultural interactions with negative emotions more frequently than those at the intermediate and mature stages.

**Methods**

The data for this paper are drawn from a study of students' pre-college experiences with difference.  The project as a whole sought to understand the multiple facets of students' intercultural experiences, from the emotions described in the course of interaction, to the concepts and language students associate with interactions with difference.  This phase of the study sought to investigate what stages of intercultural development would be evident in the data gathered from a large and diverse group of first year students, and to use this data as a lens for critically examining leading models of intercultural competence

*Data Collection*

In the first week of the fall semester, 2010, all 447 incoming students in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota were assigned to write a 500 word reflection upon an encounter with difference prior to coming with college. They were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Think about a time in the last year when you encountered difference: when you realized that you were experiencing a variety of ideas, perspectives, world views, cultures, races or ethnicities. This could be an experience that happened in just a moment or a longer, bigger event. Choose an experience that reveals how you think, feel and act when you encounter difference.

The choice of an open-ended prompt was guided by the findings of Deardorff's (2006) study, in which established intercultural experts identified in-person interviews and narrative diaries as top assessment methods to measure intercultural competence, preferable to self-report instruments or pre- and post-testing approaches (p. 251). Because interviews are not efficient for obtaining large-scale data, the written response was the selected method of choice.

The responses were collected through an online course platform by an independent team of researchers, and subsequently coded and analyzed for recurrent themes. Four hundred and fourteen students consented to having their responses anonymously used in this research study. Table 1 presents demographic information for our sample population which is more racially and ethnically diverse and has a larger female population than the broader institution. For example, in 2010, the overall undergraduate population was 75% White; 5% Black; 48% Male and 52% Female.

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants (n=414)

| Race | | | | | | Age | | Gender | | |
|------|------|------|----------|-------|---------|------------|-------|------|--------|---------|
| Black | Am. Indian | Asian | Hispanic | White | Unknown | Median Age | Range | Male | Female | Unknown |
| 13% n=53 | 2% n=7 | 15% n=61 | 1% n=5 | 65% n= 268 | 4% n=20 | 18 | 16-31 | 33% n= 135 | 65% n=271 | 2% n=8 |

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by three coders blinded to any characteristics of the essay writer. The initial framework for analysis was drawn from the review of relevant literature, and enriched through additional open coding of themes emerging from the data. Guided by the aims of the study, the main coding category was the level of intercultural maturity evident in the encounter as narrated in the essay. The framework was designed to capture how individual respondents construe difference along a developmental continuum. These levels were drawn from King and Baxter-Magolda's (2005) work on intercultural maturity. The choice was motivated by the fact that these three basic categories correspond to the broadest tenets of the other two models, and they were proven highly functional as coding categories. The primary codes are described below in Table 2.

Table 2. Primary Codes: Level of Intercultural Maturity

| Level of Intercultural Maturity | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Initial: "Novice" (304) | rule-based behavior, little flexibility |

| Intermediate: "Practitioner" (75) | grappling with new ideas; with an understanding of what it means to experience difference--actively working to develop internal perspectives and self-definition |
|---|---|
| Mature: "Cultural border crosser" (15) | Having a set of internally defined perspectives used to guide action and knowledge construction |

(King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p.576)

The data was also coded in a targeted fashion for internal and external outcomes of the interaction (Deardorff, 2006), corresponding to what the speaker practiced or gained in the experience, and reported emotions (see Table 3). Out of all codes for emotions experienced in the course of interaction, five (anxiety, anger, fear, curiosity, and pleasure) were drawn from the literature. The list was eventually expanded in the course of to also include guilt, positive surprise, and loneliness. The codes ultimately used in the analysis were divided into positive (curiosity, pleasure, positive surprise) and negative (fear, anger, loneliness, and anxiety).

Table 3. Targeted Codes: Outcomes of experience

| Outcome of Experience | |
|---|---|
| a. internal: mindfulness (334) | Creation of new categories, awareness of more than one perspective, ability to shift frames of reference |
| b. external: productive interpersonal exchange (120) | Achieving valued objectives, acting in a culturally-sensitive manner |
| c. emotions | Passages of the narrative that talk about emotions experienced in the course or as a result of the interaction |
|     a.   guilt (12) | Feelings of remorse caused by feeling that one is responsible for a wrong or offence |
|     b.   positive surprise (15) | Positive feelings related to an unexpected occurrence |
|     c.   loneliness (17) | Sadness associated with being or feeling alone |
|     f.   pleasure (14) | Feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment |
|     g.   curiosity (35) | Feelings of strong desire to know or learn something |
|     h.   fear (20) | Feelings associated with seeing or apprehending danger, pain or a threat |
|     i.   anger (21) | Strong feelings of annoyance, displeasure, hostility, etc. |
|     j.   anxiety (71) | Feelings of worry, nervousness, or unease, especially about an imminent event or an uncertain outcome |
| Statements of valuing cultural diversity (83) | Statements or expressions of considering diversity positive or beneficial |
| Statements of not valuing cultural diversity (0) | Statements or expressions of considering diversity negative or harmful |
| Narrative unrelated to the prompt (109) | Narratives that do not describe an encounter with different ideas, perspectives, world views, cultures, races or ethnicities |

The researchers trained for inter-coder reliability until reaching the threshold of 80% agreement on the primary codes in a random sample of 10 responses, and proceeded with independent coding. Upon the completion of the coding process, the qualitative file was integrated with student demographic data including ethnicity, age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

### *Limitations*

This study is based on the perceptions and self-reports of students, and like any project of this kind, it is susceptible to social desirability bias and respondents' inability to see beyond their own perspective. Moreover, the choice of a large sample required tradeoffs in depth and frequency. Due to logistical and financial limitations, the study is limited to one critical interaction at a single time point.

Even though students were assured that the assignment was not graded, the data was collected in the performative context of a first-year classroom. Incoming students are likely to be very mindful of how they present themselves to others, and of the presence of norms they are expected to meet. The findings of this study must, therefore be interpreted with a lens attuned to the performance of perceived expectations from teachers and the research team. In this study, the performative context presents a limitation at the individual level, but an opportunity at the collective level to examine societal norms and themes that are incorporated most prominently in student reflections.

## Results

### *Hypothesis 1: Were the majority of respondents novices to intercultural engagement?*

The first hypothesis is supported by the analysis of student narratives for three levels of intercultural maturity. 79% of responses (n=326) were classified by the coders as representing the initial stage of intercultural maturity (see Figure 1). Respondents in this category demonstrated minimal thinking about their own culture and the cultures of others, described encounters with difference from an ethnocentric stance, or exhibited a strong dependence on others for their identity and beliefs.

Eighteen percent of the responses (n=73) were classified as indicative of the intermediate stage of intercultural maturity. Respondents in the intermediate stage expressed some degree of awareness of how their own culture and its impact on their worldview. Respondents who exhibited intermediate stage characteristics typically put themselves in the other's shoes, and demonstrated a capacity to think independently of learned norms they identified from culture or family contexts.



Figure 1. Level of Intercultural Maturity

- Initial
- Intermediate
- Mature

18%

79%
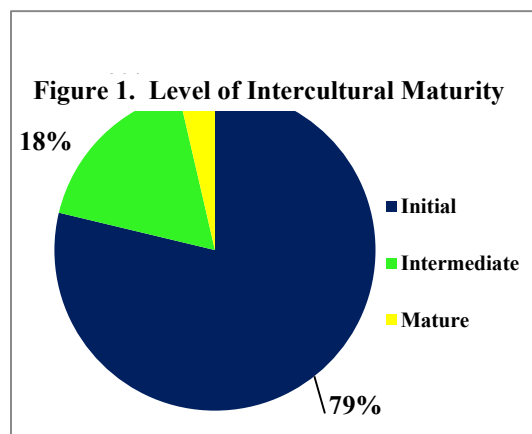
Only 3% of responses (n=15) represented the mature stage of intercultural development. Mature stage responses showed evidence of the ability to shift perspectives and not only to be aware of multiple

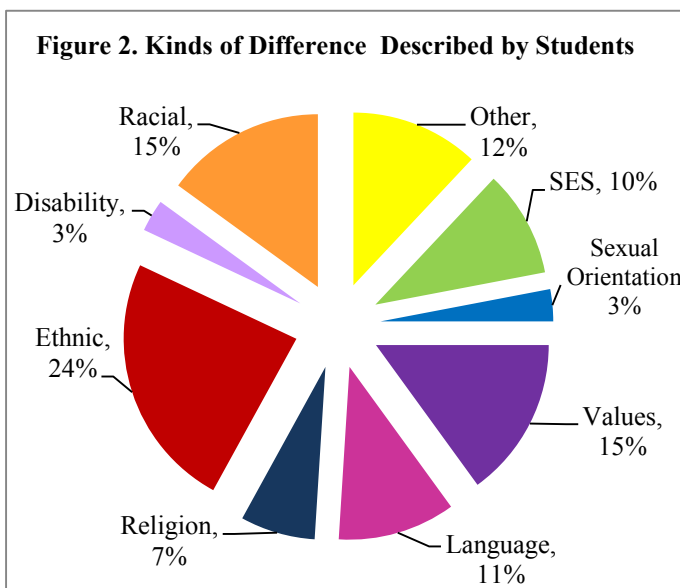perspectives, but also to attune behavior in accordance with the situation (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

There are currently no comparable studies examining the developmental level of college freshmen using a qualitative methodology and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity. The closest point of comparison is based on the more widely used Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), where the three ethnocentric stages have significant similarities with the "initial" classification. Compared to studies using the IDI, our findings represent a slightly higher percentage of intercultural novices among college underclassmen in the United States (Durocher, 2007; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Pedersen, 2010; Rexeisen et al., 2008). Elsewhere, the percentage of students at the initial level stands at about 60-65% (Durocher, 2007; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). The difference may be attributed to selection bias in studies using the IDI that measure intercultural development before and during study abroad trips, which tend to attract individuals with a greater interest in other cultures than the general population. Previous studies also included first- and second-year undergraduates; our study is limited to incoming first-year students in the first weeks of first semester.  To date, studies measuring intercultural competence among college students are too small for reliable comparisons, and these findings take the state of the research one step further. There is still need, therefore, for more representative research on the baseline levels of incoming students' intercultural development levels.

### *Hypothesis 2:  Do first-year respondents demonstrate defensiveness towards or avoidance of perceived difference in describing intercultural encounters?*

Examining the second hypothesis involved an analytical approach from multiple directions.  First, how did students define "difference" or what counted as "difference" in their responses? What was their stated attitude towards the difference they encountered?  Finally, to what extent were the attitudes expressed consistent with the description of the encounters themselves?

### *Kinds of differenc*e

The kinds of difference described in the data represented a considerable range (see Figure 2), but the single most common category of difference referred to by respondents was ethnic – related to national or cultural differences stemming from different origins.  We note that even within the subset of narratives focused on ethnic difference, students described a wide range of experiences and contexts.  This is noteworthy because intercultural interactions are often represented as occurring between individuals from different nations. However, in our data, students identify a range of both domestic and

Figure 2. Kinds of Difference  Described by Students

Racial, 15%
Other, 12%
SES, 10%
Disability, 3%
Sexual Orientation 3%
Ethnic, 24%
Values, 15%
Religion, 7%
Language, 11%

international contexts of intercultural interactions, from their neighborhood or workplace, to the locker room or a study or mission trip abroad.

### *Attitudes towards difference*

Analysis of student responses yielded a somewhat conflicted image of incoming students' attitudes towards difference. In the initial analysis, it came as somewhat of a surprise in light of intercultural theory that students rarely framed difference as a threat or something to be resisted. In describing how they think, feel and act when they encounter difference, essay narrators made frequent, unprompted statements declaring how much they value different people or ideas. Examples of student statements include:

> I think it's good to learn about something that you don't know about and it's different from you.

> In my opinion learning about people different from you is one of the most important things that people should do.

In fact, for all demographic groups, whenever a value judgment is expressed with regard to difference in the data set, it is positive. Students did not describe difference as threatening, but rather as interesting, fun, and beneficial.

### *Tensions and contradictions*

The picture of positive attitudes towards difference is complicated by two findings suggestive of tensions underneath the smooth surface of students' universal valuing of difference. These findings suggest that while open defensiveness towards difference is not evident, there is indication of detachment and minimization.

The first area of tension is evident in the language used across the sample to describe it. The frequent statements of valuing difference were typically broad and sweeping. Overall, they tended to lack narrative substantiation, such as providing specificity on the concept and awareness of the complexity surrounding intercultural difference. Characteristic examples include:

> It was fun and enriching to be in a house that has a totally different culture and background than the culture you're used to.

> This world would be a very boring place if we were all the same and thought the same way.

Another pattern in the respondents' language, however, suggests areas of tension with these stated values. Student responses frequently described ethnic and racial differences as "challenges" or "obstacles" that could or must be "conquered" and "overcome." Again, these typically lacked substantiation or elaboration beyond claims regarding the impact of intercultural interactions.

Contrary to the responses that demonstrated a positive but detached orientation towards intercultural difference, a smaller subset of responses explicitly articulated a more substantive and complex understanding of the impact of engaging in intercultural interactions, and provided examples or elaboration. For example:

> College allows us all to find out who we really are and permits our ideas and values to change as we let other people of different races, religion, cultures, perspectives, and views work their way into our lives.

> Going around with the same people; the same routine can become to (sic) comfortable for a person. Having different cultures, and different ideas around you can help you to figure out yourself.

Substantiation and elaboration were most common in responses that focused on describing how encountering diverse others helped students differentiate from beliefs or values they inherited and to build an independent identity. Responses that involved this theme tended to provide the most extensive substantiation for a stated valuing of difference.

The second indication of detachment or even minimization of difference has to do with understandings of difference shared by 12% of the student sample. This subset of students did not describe an encounter with different ideas, perspectives, world views, cultures, races or ethnicities. Such responses were coded as unrelated to the prompt and assigned a separate category ("other"), which eventually included such topics as life changes, the overcoming of challenges, personal accomplishments, or impactful books that the students read. This sub-set of responses did not describe difference in terms of an interaction with others who they may have perceived as different from themselves, but an individual challenge or change in their own life that they had overcome. Many students described periods in their educational history, such as:
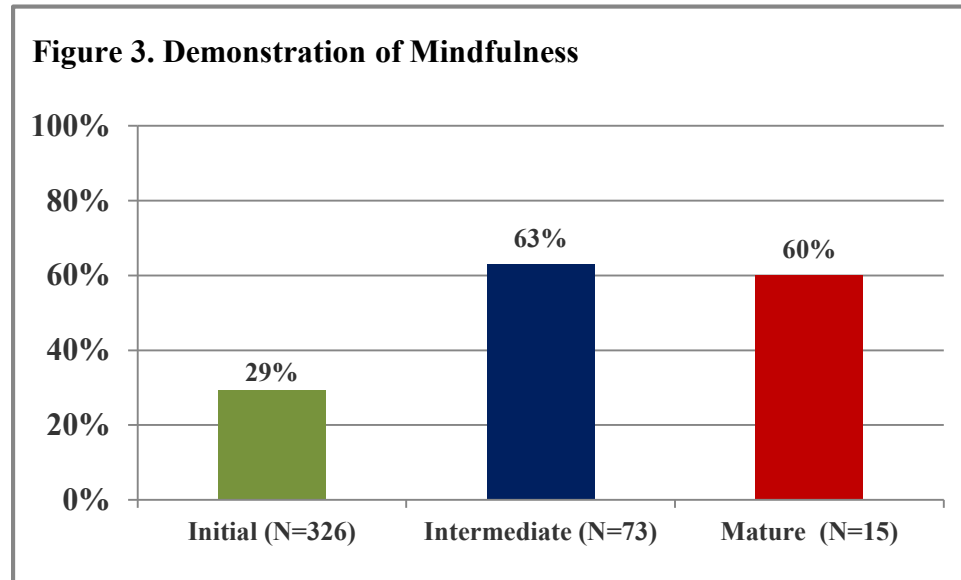
> …it is safe to call (coming to college) the biggest change I have encountered.

> There are many differences to why I believe 11th grade was the most challenging year.

Some responses in this category described a new arts-related experience, such as going to a concert. Another trend in the "other" group was to describe a difficult challenge the individual had experienced, such as, "I never looked forward to my job though the only purpose which kept me going was because of prom and college." Over all, a common theme in the "other" category was students describing the interaction from an intrapersonal and not an intercultural or even interpersonal perspective. This finding may indicate these respondents' detachment from difference as defined by the researchers. It could also be seen as reflective of young people's tendency to  hold an individualistic rather than a collective view of society, where one's own self-fulfillment is at the center and difference is useful primarily as a means for self-discovery.

***Hypothesis 3:  Are first-year respondents whose responses display mindfulness more likely to describe productive interpersonal exchange than respondents who do not display mindfulness?***

Leading intercultural models led us to hypothesize that respondents whose reflections show evidence of intrapersonal mindfulness would describe productive interpersonal interaction at a rate greater than those whose responses do n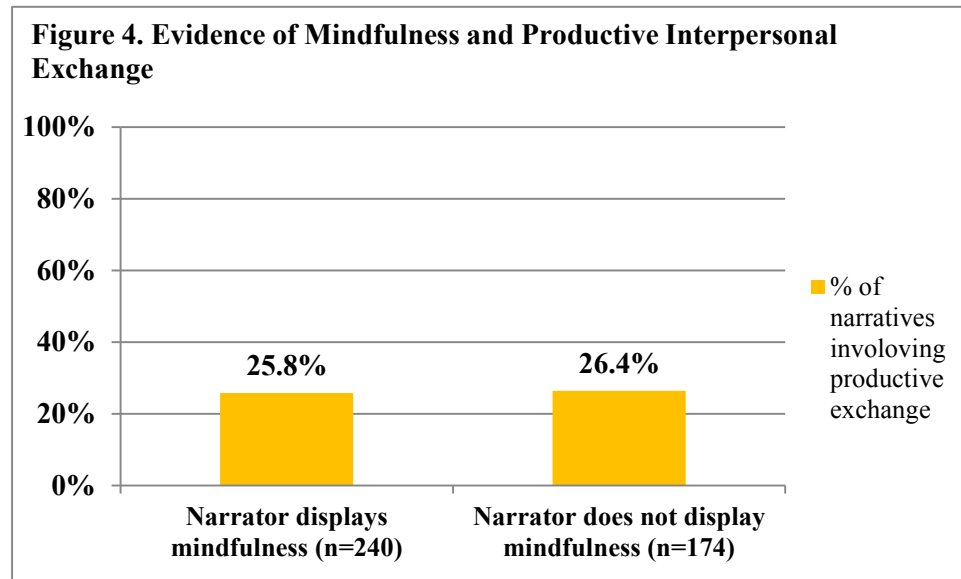ot display such mindfulness. The category of mindfulness in our codebook corresponds to what Deardorff (2006) terms as internal outcomes, including creating new categories, recognizing more than one perspective, and shifting frames of reference. The category for productive interpersonal exchange

**Figure 3. Demonstration of Mindfulness**

| Stage | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Initial (N=326) | 29% |
| Intermediate (N=73) | 63% |
| Mature (N=15) | 60% |

corresponds to Deardorff's (2006) external outcomes - achieving valued objectives and acting in a culturally sensitive manner.

In our exploratory analysis, we found that mindfulness was evidenced in over 60% of responses coded at the intermediate or mature stage of intercultural maturity, compared to 30% in the initial stage (see Figure 3).

The next step in the analysis involved the creation of categorical variables for the presence or absence of mindfulness (creating new categories, recognizing more than one perspective, or shifting frames of reference) as well as the presence or absence of productive interpersonal exchange (achieving valued objectives or acting in a culturally sensitive manner).

Productive interpersonal exchange is evident in a quarter of the responses, regardless of whether mindfulness is present or not (see Figure 4). The difference between the groups is not statistically significant (p = .958). The hypothesis was therefore not substantiated by the data – there is no difference as far as productive exchange for individuals who do and do not display mindfulness.

**Figure 4. Evidence of Mindfulness and Productive Interpersonal Exchange**

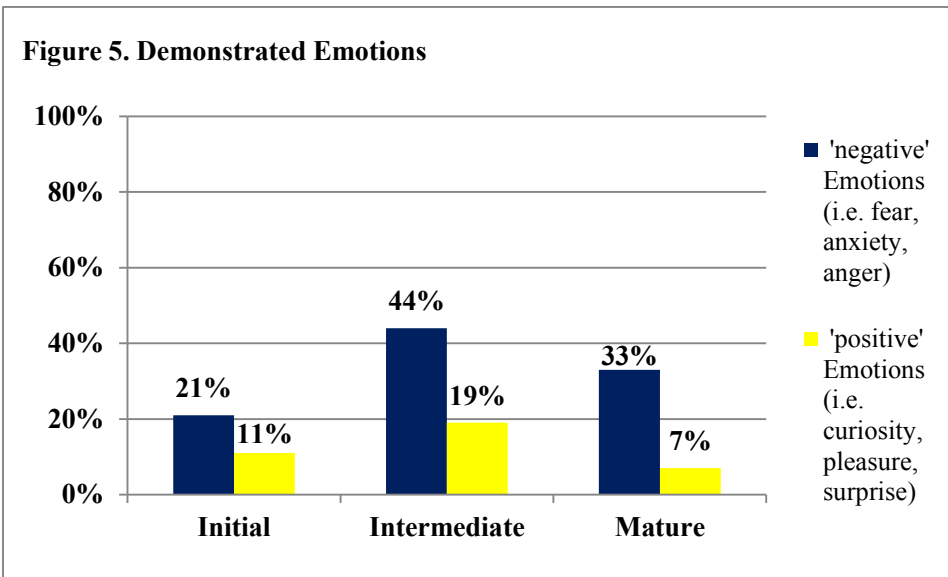| | % of narratives involoving productive exchange |
|---|---|
| Narrator displays mindfulness (n=240) | 25.8% |
| Narrator does not display mindfulness (n=174) | 26.4% |

The interpretation of this finding must consider that what a respondent describes as a productive interaction may have only been satisfying to one side. The finding does, however, resonate with a potential criticism of intercultural development models – namely, that it is possible to have productive relational exchange without being mindful. People's reliance on habits is well-documented – we engage in so many similar interactions that much of our behavior follows a predictable pattern. With a minimal amount of cognitive flexibility, encounters with diverse individuals do not need to be mindful to be perceived as productive. Deardorff (2006) specifically acknowledges this potential challenge to her theory, stating that "it is possible to go from attitudes and/or attitudes and skills/knowledge directly to the external outcome" (p. 257).

On an encouraging note, this finding highlights that it may be possible for young people in college to have satisfying interpersonal exchange across difference even at an ethnocentric stage of intercultural development. On a more difficult note, however, changing habitual behaviors requires that young people find themselves in an environment where their previously ingrained habits no longer work. As discussed above, students arrive with little experience across difference – so if universities aim to assist in developing their intercultural competence, their programming will need to be designed to accelerate the pace of recasting their former habits.

### Hypothesis 4:  Did respondents at the novice stage of intercultural development associate intercultural interactions with negative emotions more frequently than those at the intermediate and mature stages?

Intercultural theory led us to hypothesize that emotions reported in student reflections would vary by level of maturity, with novices reporting more negative emotions such as anxiety and fear. Analysis of reported emotions, however, did not yield a linear pattern of increasing comfort (see Figure 5).

Expressions of emotions such as fear, anger, loneliness, and anxiety were more frequent among those at the intermediate and mature stage than novices. The incidence of positive emotions such as curiosity and pleasure is actually higher at the initial level than the most mature one. Taken together, students at the intermediate and mature stages report more negative and more positive emotions than those at the initial, ethnocentric stage. Both positive and negative emotions peak at the intermediate stage that marks the transition from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

**Figure 5. Demonstrated Emotions**

A bar chart titled "Figure 5. Demonstrated Emotions" with a vertical axis from 0% to 100%. Three groups of bars labeled Initial, Intermediate, and Mature. 'negative' Emotions (i.e. fear, anxiety, anger) shown in dark blue: Initial 21%, Intermediate 44%, Mature 33%. 'positive' Emotions (i.e. curiosity, pleasure, surprise) shown in yellow: Initial 11%, Intermediate 19%, Mature 7%.

These findings highlight the positive role of discomfort and disequilibrium as necessary parts of the process of developing intercultural maturity, and they are not surprising in light of research on the educational benefits of racial and ethnic diversity (Bowman & Brandenburger, 2012). What does appear surprising is the overall percentage of all narratives that expressed either positive or negative emotions when describing an encounter with difference. Only 25% of all essays in the sample referenced any kind of emotion in the encounter. There are several possible interpretations of the finding. It may reflect students' perception of the assignment, or the fact that they were responding to a prompt administered in the first week of class in the first year of college. It may also indicate a certain level of detachment from difference that allows for an impassioned description.

Through the lens of Gudykunst's (1998, 2005) work on anxiety and uncertainty management thresholds, one explanation might also be that students' pre-college interactions with difference are not above, but below their threshold, thereby diminishing their capacity for effective communication. A minimal level of anxiety is a prerequisite of mindfulness towards others, and if it dips below that threshold, they are likely to disengage or interact with little mindfulness – a process that fits the themes discussed in relation to Hypothesis 2.

**Discussion**

Bennett (1993) theorized that encountering significant differences in other people typically engenders a flight or fight response. Our data set suggests that among college students today, flight might be the more common phenomenon. However, it must be noted that the directions that the "flight" takes are complex and defy one-dimensional interpretations. Despite a nearly universal valuing of difference at the declarative level, there is a persistent theme of approaching it as an obstacle to be overcome or a test to be passed rather than an invitation to interpersonal exchange. A tendency to minimize perceived difference, even when it is through the act of idealizing it, was much more prevalent in our data than an outright detachment. We

also observe a related phenomenon of emotional withdrawal from potentially difficult encounters that may indicate an internal detachment. We conclude that as college students progress along the developmental continuum, an intercultural novice may not explicitly demonstrate a resistant or defensive stance, but is likely to minimize or simplify difference – whether by not talking about it at all, or extolling the value of difference while reducing the interaction to a simple conclusion that "we are all the same." Over all, this research supports the findings of earlier studies (Durocher, 2007; Medina-Lopez-Portillo 2004; Pedersen, 2010; Rexeisen et al., 2008) that the majority of college students arrive on campus with little experience at direct or substantive interaction across difference.

As Bell and Hartmann (2007) note, U.S. culture has moved in a direction of "extolling the virtues of difference, celebrating diversity as a value in itself, and describing diversity as the new cornerstone of American democratic idealism" (p. 895). The fact that students make multiple declarations of valuing diversity without any prompting while showing signs of emotional disengagement may suggest that they are performing predominant cultural discourse around diversity. Such intention or declaration towards difference may be seen a form of minimization when it is not accompanied by substantiation or recognition of complexity.

### *Implications for theory and practice*
Our study extends intercultural theory by complicating conventional thinking about typical attitudes toward difference at the novice stage. Our findings indicate that the point at which students begin their intercultural journey in college differs in slight but important degree from the initial stage postulated by intercultural models. Leading models postulate that openness and the valuing of different perspectives are prerequisites for development, but they also note that attitude is a complex factor and requires more than an intention to be substantiated. Many students now come to campus with external openness but internal detachment, implying a necessary adjustment of direction for those charged with supporting their intercultural development.

In the past, appreciation for diversity was found in short supply on college campuses (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Therefore, faculty and college development professionals had a significant role to play in overcoming resistance by developing students' appreciation towards difference. If the findings of this study are replicated elsewhere, we will be faced with the conclusion unlike in the past, students now come to campus with a very positive orientation and outward appreciation of difference. Even though this attitude may be shallow and lack roots in actual experience, it represents an important change with implications for pedagogy. If students do not display outward resistance towards diverse others, faculty and college development professionals may move quickly beyond the stage of overcoming resistance at the starting point in their programming. Their task, however, is perhaps becoming more complex as resistance does remain at a deeper and unarticulated level even if stated attitudes towards difference are quite positive.

The second implication for practice stems from the lack of established relationship in the student data between intrapersonal mindfulness and productive interaction. Even without an ethnorelative awareness, a quarter of all incoming students appear to bring enough interest and skill to be able to engage in interactions that they perceive as constructive. As Deardorff (2006) has noted, positive attitude and interpersonal skills can be enough to enable positive

communication outcomes. She also goes on to state, however, that, "the degree of appropriateness and effectiveness would be more limited than if the internal outcome had also been achieved" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 257). This insight is shared intuitively by many of those who work in intercultural competence development, but due to the limitations of studies based on self-reported perception, it still remains to be empirically validated, leaving much need for further research.

On the one hand, these findings lend credence to approaches that focus specifically on external communication skills. It would appear that at a basic level, such basic skills can be developed by all regardless of one's level of ethnocentrism or intrapersonal maturity. On the other hand, findings of the subtle resistance towards difference hidden underneath an affirmative surface lead us to recommend programs that intentionally challenge students' existing cognitive and behavioral habits, even when these habits produce outcomes perceived by students as productive (Lee et al., 2012).

The college years can be transformative for young people in how they perceive and relate to diversity, and the initial level of intercultural development is critical to the course of their subsequent growth in intercultural competence. As authors of a recent study on diversity experiences and attitude change concluded, "the ideal level and form of challenge will vary substantially depending on students' previous experiences with diversity; faculty and practitioners should intentionally tailor their teaching and programming accordingly" (Bowman & Brandenburger, 2012, p.196). This study challenges those in higher education to continually re-evaluate our theoretical assumptions in light of our own time and context, and to tailor educational programs accordingly.

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