

# **International Experiences as Stimuli for Moral and Intercultural Schema Change**

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## **Abstract**

We live in a global economy in which technology allows for the gathering, analysis, organization, and dissemination of huge quantities of data. Skilled persons may be hired to manage this process, but something more is needed from leaders who are called upon to make sense of culturally complex situations and make effective business decisions in a global market. Wisdom must be added to knowledge; wisdom to see beyond the demands of organizational efficiency and financial profitability; to be able to make moral decisions that are both sensitive to differences in cultural values and responsible to all stakeholders; simultaneously effective for business and sensitive to the needs of environment and society. How can leaders at the crossroads of national and international business cultures develop this moral reasoning and cultural sensitivity? This article proposes that what is needed are new mental schema that can integrate both a moral frame and a cross-cultural perspective.

## **Introduction**

A growing body of research literature points to cross-cultural experience as an effective catalyst for challenging existing frames of mind and stimulating the creation of new ways of knowing that incorporate knowledge and sensitivities of both host and target cultures (Cherry, Lee, & Chien, 2003; Dinges & Baldwin, 1996; Early & Masakowski, 2004, Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003). At its best, a cross cultural experience enhances the ability to make sense of new and ambiguous situations, to recognize one's own personal assumptions and biases and to be able to hold them in abeyance (like the suspension of disbelief necessary to really enjoy theatre or a good work of fiction) while learning from the surroundings, and the ability to see others as teachers... to become a learner (Thomas & Inkson, 2004).

We live in a global economy in which technology allows for the gathering, analysis, organization, and dissemination of huge quantities of data. Skilled persons may be hired to manage this process, but something more is needed from leaders who are called upon to make sense of culturally complex situations and make effective business decisions in a global market. Wisdom must be added to knowledge; wisdom to see beyond the demands of organizational efficiency and financial profitability; to be able to make moral decisions that are both sensitive to differences in cultural values and responsible to all stakeholders; simultaneously effective for business and sensitive to the needs of environment and society.

How can leaders at the crossroads of national and international business cultures develop this moral reasoning and cultural sensitivity? Traditional approaches to leadership development have focused on cognitive elements or competencies that can enhance adaptation to new situations (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002). Others (Brugman, 2003; Conroy & Emerson, 2004; Gorman, Duffy & Heffernan, 1994; Rogers, 2002) look for life experiences that stimulate growth and development. These approaches, while valid, have tended to focus on either moral reasoning or enhancement of a cross-cultural perspective. This article proposes that what is needed are new mental schema that can integrate both a moral frame and a cross-cultural perspective.

### **Schema Theory**

An understanding of schema theory is helpful in understanding this process. Markus (1977) defines schema as “the dynamic, cognitive knowledge structures regarding specific concepts, entities, and events used by individuals to encode and represent incoming information efficiently” (p. 65). Schema serve as mental maps or frames which enable individuals to orient themselves within their experiential terrain and guide interpretations of past and present and expectations for the future (Louis, 1983). New information is processed according to how it fits into existing schema. The way that learners acquire knowledge under schema theory is similar to Piaget’s model of cognitive development (Crain, 1985). Widmayer (2005) posits three different reactions that a learner can have to new information: accretion, tuning, and restructuring. In accretion, learners take new input and assimilate it into existing schema. Tuning is when existing schema are modified to accommodate new knowledge. Restructuring is the process of creating a new schema incorporating old schema and new information.

For an individual to learn, existing information and schema must be challenged and new schema formed. Festinger (1957) introduced the idea of cognitive dissonance, which explains the process leading to restructuring of schema, resulting in learning: the greater the dissonance, the greater the potential for learning. The incongruity or cognitive dissonance created by exposure to new experiences that challenge or do not fit existing frames of reference can lead to the creation of new schema capable of reconciling the old and the new.

One way to challenge existing schema in leaders is to have them engage in cross-cultural experiences (Kracher, Chatterjee & Lundquist, 2002; Kolb, 1984). Yamakazi (2004) extols the value of such experiences for management development: “encounters with individuals of different cultures, visits to overseas customers, short visits to international divisions, and long-term emersion in a new host culture have become expected, even required aspects of management success”.

From these experiences managers can learn a variety of skills that facilitate success in a new host culture and facilitate the transfer of knowledge across cultures (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). McCall and Hollenbeck (2002) contend that cross cultural experiences can be an important part of developing global executives. Literature on experiential learning (Kracher, et al, 2002; Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Porter & Tansky, 1994) supports the idea that this kind of learning experience has a significant impact. Markus (1977) contends that this impact is activated through the change in individual schema. Recent research (Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003) shows that multicultural experiences are effective means toward schema change and growth in cognitive flexibility, moral reasoning and intercultural development.

### **Mezirow's Transformative Learning**

Mezirow (1997) postulates that transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference (schema). Frames of reference shape expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. A frame of reference has two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view. Habits of mind are more durable, whereas points of view are subject to change as result of reflection on the “content or process by which problems are solved or the need to modify assumptions is recognized. This happens whenever we try to understand actions that do now work the way we anticipated” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). In the cross-cultural context, moral reasoning may represent the habits of the mind, in that a moral perspective may be more durable and difficult to change. Point of view may be represented by the evolution of cultural skills and knowledge resulting from cultural exposure and perhaps language study. To change the frame of reference, both must evolve.

### **The Habits of the Mind: Impacting Moral Development**

Encountering differing value systems in international cultures can cause “moral dissonance” and lead to reflection and growth in moral reasoning and sensitivity. A necessary element in mature moral/ethical reasoning is the ability to transcend one’s own personal self-interest and to change perspective and consider the interest and well-being of others. International experiences can be an effective means of enhancing self-transcendence and the process of moral development.

Kohlberg’s stages of moral development and Piaget’s cognitive developmental stages help lay the theoretical foundation for this paper. The work of Robert Kegan (1994) suggests that mental development throughout adulthood is possible, even necessary for a healthy productive life. As one faces increasingly complex challenges or responsibilities, new job demands, or interactions in a culturally diverse society, new capabilities of making meaning, problem solving, and decision making are required. This can spark development toward a new order of consciousness to make sense of culturally complex situations.

Cook (2005) contends that transition from organizational leadership to truly strategic leadership involves the development and enhancement of new skills and abilities. Among those skills is advanced ability in moral reasoning. “The constraints, demands and expectations of strategic leaders bring multi-dimensional pressures to bear that require abilities in moral reasoning far more demanding than those required in less complex environments” (p. 2). Persons who can function at the higher stages of moral development are more able to deal with complex or ambiguous situations (Kohlberg, 1976; Mudrack, 2003; Prichard, 1999). International experiences provide the opportunity to grow in understanding of the moral motivations and values of the host culture. This understanding can be converted into improved relationships with host countries and improved global decision-making.

Leadership involves decision-making. Moral development enhances decision-making quality by increasing the mind’s ability to consider and to choose among conflicting or competing alternatives. The perspective shift necessary to consider the effects of a decision on others can be seen as exercise in thinking the way others think. Just as understanding the motivations of customers is important in commercial marketing, so is understanding the values of culturally diverse stakeholders in the “moral market”. Cross-cultural experiences give the opportunity to grow in understanding of the moral motivations and values of the host culture.

### **Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development**

The research of Lawrence Kohlberg (1969, 1976) is the foundation of modern moral development theory. Kohlberg believed and was able to demonstrate through empirical research that people progress through a sequence of stages in moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1969). In his study, Kohlberg interviewed children on a series of dilemmas in which a moral choice had to be made. A content analysis of the responses yielded evidence of not only cognitive, but also moral reasoning used to explain the choices. Kohlberg’s great contribution was the creation of a taxonomy of three levels encompassing six stages of moral development (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

### **Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development**

1. Preconventional Morality
  - a. Stage 1: Obedience / Punishment orientation
  - b. Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange
2. Conventional Morality
  - a. Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships
  - b. Stage 4: Maintaining the Social Order
3. Postconventional Morality
  - a. Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights
  - b. Stage 6: Universal Principles

Source: W.C. Crain (1985) *Theories of Development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

In Kohlberg's model, development of moral reasoning progresses from a pre-conventional, self-centered orientation through stages toward an outward-directed level of principled conscience, operating under influence of society and universal principles. The pre-conventional stage is represented by focus on self-interest. Right is defined by application of strict rules and norms. The justification of self-interest is sufficient support for what is right. At the level of conventional morality, individuals value the maintenance of the expectations of family, group, or nation. The attitude is not only one of *conformity* to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order and identifying with the persons or group involved in it. The majority of people operate at the conventional stage of morality (Kohlberg, 1976). The highest level of moral development is called post-conventional. At this stage, right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles that appeal to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (e.g. the Golden Mean, Kant's categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma (1999) introduce the idea that growth in moral reasoning is characterized by the gradual replacement of "primitive" forms of thinking with "more complex" moral schema. Theoretically, the impact of an international experience is such that schema at lower, less complex stages of moral reasoning would be challenged by the cognitive dissonance created by interactions with the people, norms, geography, etc. of a different culture. The greater the challenge, the greater the potential for growth in moral reasoning ability. This line of reasoning suggests the following proposition:

***Proposition 1: Cross-cultural experiences between countries with significantly different cultures may result in a greater moral growth than experiences between countries of similar cultures.***

### **The Effect of International Cross-Cultural Experience**

While the value of a cross-cultural experience is well-supported in management and education literature, more research is necessary to understand how this experience impacts schema and why these experiences do not impact everyone in the same way. Two areas of particular interest are how cross-cultural experiences impact schema associated with moral development and schema associated with cross-cultural competence and sensitivity. Pedersen (1988) and Shweder (1991) have shown how moral and intercultural dilemmas are frequently linked to one another. Understanding cultures and ethics requires the cognitive flexibility to navigate and consider complex frameworks of values, beliefs, epistemological orientations and expectations (Wainryb, et al., 1998; Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003). An advantage of international and cross-cultural experiences over traditional training programs is that they offer synchronous and multidimensional growth opportunities that would be impossible to reproduce in a classroom simulation. Everyday life in an intercultural situation can develop the adaptive skills necessary to live and work with others who come from very different backgrounds. Multicultural experiences provide inviting stages on which to exercise both moral and intercultural development through providing opportunities to grow in flexible thinking (Endicott, Bock, Narvaez, 2002).

## Cross-cultural Experience as Catalyst for Growth in Cultural Sensitivity

Theories of intercultural sensitivity have tended to emphasize communication competence and skills. Less frequently are discussed the developmental sequences in which these skills are achieved. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is a theory that connects cross-cultural experience with cognitive development. (See Figure 2.) The assumption of the model is that as intercultural challenges cause one's experiences of cultural difference to become more complex, one's competence in intercultural relations increases (Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003). The DMIS stages reflect increasing sensitivity to cultural difference, progressing from a strong ethnocentric "denial of difference" in which cultural differences are rejected and ones own culture is seen as the preferable model, to the ethno-relative acceptance of difference and finally adaptation and integration of differences. At this higher level, because the individual can shift her/his frame of reference and take on the perspective of the other, she or he is more effective at relating to people from other cultures (Endicott, et al, 2003, p. 405). Just as with moral development, greater cultural sensitivity comes from attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance. However, culturally-based cognitive dissonance may be more directly resolved through the development of language skills and an appreciation and understanding of the culture, history, art, music, and social norms of the new culture.

***Proposition 2: Cross-cultural experiences between countries with significantly different cultures may result in a greater cultural sensitivity than experiences between countries of similar cultures.***

Figure 2.

### Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

- A. Traditional emphasis
  - 1. Awareness of cultural differences
  - 2. Emphasis on communication competence and skills
- B. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)
  - 1. **Ethnocentric level**
    - a. Stage 1: Denial of difference
    - b. Stage 2: Defense against difference
    - c. Stage 3: Minimization of difference
  - 2. **Ethnorelative level**
    - a. Stage 4: Acceptance of difference
    - b. Stage 5: Adaptation to difference
    - c. Stage 6: Integration of difference

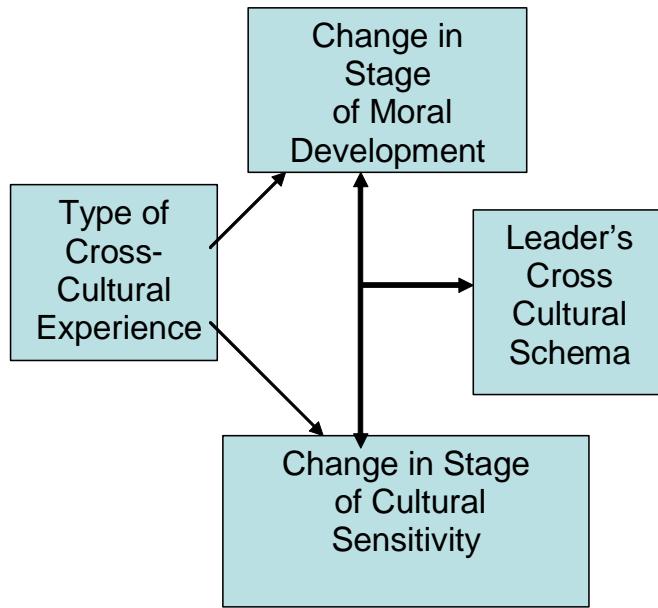
Source: Endicott, L., Bock, T., & Narvaez, D. (2003). "Moral reasoning, intercultural development, and multicultural experiences: relations and cognitive underpinnings." *International Journal of Intercultural relations*. 27: 403-419.

The simultaneous application of moral reasoning and cultural sensitivity competencies to a situation that calls into question prior assumptions can lead to the formulation of new ways of making meaning and understanding experience. It can lead to development along both moral and cultural dimensions.

An insight that links the post-Kohlbergian conceptualization moral development through progressive stages with Bennett's intercultural development theory is the shift from relatively rigid thinking to more flexible thinking (Bennet, 1993). Flexible thinking is finding novel solutions to problems, "thinking outside the box", and often leads to the creation of a new cognitive framework. The interaction of moral reasoning and intercultural sensitivity may be seen as contributing to the development of flexible thinking. Application of this insight is important in understanding cross-cultural experience on leadership. The dual changes in level of cultural sensitivity and change in moral development will influence the cross cultural schema that the leader develops and will ultimately have an influence on his or her ability to make effective leadership decisions in a cross cultural context (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3.**

### **How Cross Cultural Experiences Affect Leadership Competence**

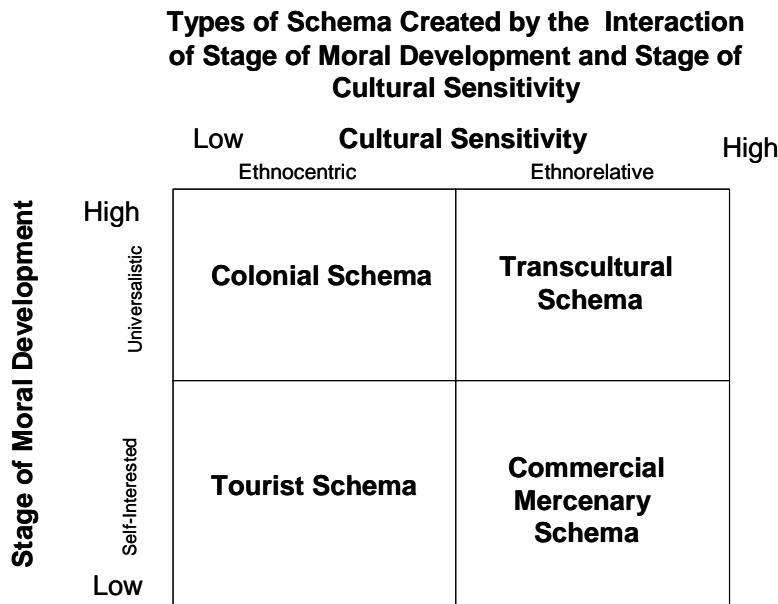


#### **What is the developmental impact of the cross cultural experience?**

A question to ask of any developmental model that proposes progression through stages is whether the progression from one stage to another is an inevitable result of a process of maturation or if certain conditions are necessary to produce it? The literature on adult moral development suggests that development is neither universal nor guaranteed, but the good news is that it is possible. This article argues that development can be spurred by cross-cultural experience. It would be naïve, however, to say that any experience of another culture will necessarily lead to maturity in moral or cultural sensitivity. There are different types of cross-cultural experiences. Differences in length and intensity, combined with differing levels of

motivation and aptitudes will lead to different levels of change in the mental schema of the learner. A model illustrating four quadrants of potential change shows the interaction of varying levels of maturity along the moral development and cultural sensitivity axes (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**



**The Tourist Experience.** A tourist is one who travels to an exotic location for the purpose of personal enjoyment. Tourism is a form of cross-cultural experience, to be sure, but it is one in which the tourist is not challenged or radically changed by the experience. New information may be gained, but there is no change in mental schema. A person who functions at a lower moral stage and who has low cultural sensitivity may experience the culture in the same way he/she would go to see a movie purely for entertainment. No transformative learning occurs. The result of the tourist experience, shown in the lower left quadrant, illustrates the result of the interaction between the lowest level of moral development and the lowest level of cultural sensitivity, or perhaps more descriptively: the level of self-interest on the moral axis, and the level of ethnocentrism on the cultural competence/sensitivity axis. When these two factors come together the result of the tourist experience is a limited view of the host culture. This intersection may be thought of as the “tourist” schema.

An example of the tourist experience from business is a short term assignment or visit to a foreign sight for project management or to solve a particular production problem. The focus is on the task or solving the problem rather than understanding the cultural context. Without significant depth interaction with the host culture, there would be little challenge to existing cultural or moral schemas and therefore little, if any, transformational effect on them.

**The Colonialist Experience.** Perhaps the best illustration of this is the negative stereotype of the nineteenth century colonialist missionary, as in James A. Michener's *Hawaii*. Western missionaries land in exotic Hawaii and waste not time in forcing foreign rules of dress and behavior on the indigenous Hawaiians. A person who sees through a “colonialist” lens may have high moral values and intentions (from the ethnocentric perspective), but without cultural sensitivity may “do a wrong thing for a right reason.” For example, a short-term service

volunteer to a foreign country may be motivated by high moral impulse to intervene to scold a man in a male-dominant culture for mistreating his wife, only to learn later that because of the public humiliation of the scolding from a foreigner, the man was so upset that he went home and beat his wife even more severely. In this scenario, it is cultural insensitivity which derails the best moral intention.

A business example of the colonialist experience is the expatriate manager who goes to the host country to implement policies and procedures from the home office, only to find resistance to his/her authoritarian manner or failure to understand the reason for the new (and foreign) policies from the host country employees. This kind of cross-cultural experience may result from a low cultural sensitivity (ethnocentric) / high moral reasoning (universalistic) schema.

**The Cultural Mercenary Experience.** An expatriate manager may have learned a foreign language and gained significant cultural knowledge of a host country, but with limited moral reasoning uses these skills for negative manipulation of the host culture. He/she may exploit his/her cultural competence in a job selling morally questionable or unhealthful products in the foreign market. Thus the high culture / low moral, or ethno-relative / self-interested orientation may result in a schema which rationalizes the use of cross-cultural skills in the pursuit of unenlightened self-interest and exploitative and even harmful behaviors. The culturally savvy but morally poor schema produced by such an experience may be referred to as the “commercial mercenary”.

**The Transcultural Experience.** A person with cultural intelligence who is also culturally sensitive has the tools to understand subtleties in the cultural environment and engage in meaningful discourse with host culture persons. If she also is capable of advanced moral reasoning, she may exhibit the moral wisdom which allows her to take the perspective of the other, be patient and confident in uncertainty, and to make decisions that serve the best interest of all parties. These are among the qualities that will allow the authentic transformational leader to exercise influence across cultures, to reconcile differences, and to do creative adaptive work in challenging circumstances. The kind of cross-cultural experience which stimulates growth in both moral development and cultural sensitivity can produce a person who exhibits qualities of both ethno-relativism and universalism. This combination produces the transcultural schema.

### Implications for Practice

The ideas expressed here support the idea that international learning experiences can be an important platform for cross-cultural management training and leader development. However, as the above typology of four types of experiences suggest, not just any international or cross-cultural visit will provide the necessary conditions for meaningful development. A short-term vacation or even a brief task-centered work project is not likely to provide the depth of challenge to one's existing mental schema. There are several components that contribute to the design of a successful training program.

In a comprehensive review of literature on competencies for successful expatriate adaptation, Yamakazi and Kayes (2004) found that experiential learning can enhance the interpersonal skills most important to adapting in a new culture. This suggests that learning to understand human relationships is more important than abstract knowledge when working in new cultures. Opportunities for social interaction and time for relationship building is important.

Effective cross-cultural learning experiences will include enhancing self-understanding through assessment of individual commitments and values (Kayes, 2002), emotion and skill development (Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002), immersion in novel and challenging cross-cultural situations (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002). These, combined with the support of a mentor, coach, or training director can enhance the development of schema for growth in personal awareness and cross-cultural understanding.

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