

**REFLEXIVITY AND CULTURAL SCHEMAS
AS AN APPROACH TO
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY**

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Why Practice Reflexivity?

Reflexivity has been acknowledged as an effective way to bridge cultural differences. It takes three steps:

1. Understand beliefs and values as culture, not nature.
2. Analyze how beliefs and values construct “cultural schemas.”
3. Examine how our own cultural schemas affect our perception of others and our interpretation of events.

Anthropology, the study of human cultures, states that **our world view is composed of interconnected beliefs called “cultural schemas.”** In order to understand anyone else, we must first understand who is understanding; we must understand our own cultural schemas. We do this through reflexivity.

Reflexivity negotiates between reflection (consideration) and reflex (automatic reaction) through open and honest reflection on one's own reactions. This reflection uncovers cultural schemas. **Cultural schemas are sets of interlocking culturally constructed assumptions that are taken for granted within a culture or sub-culture as “truth or “natural.”** If we examine them, we discover they're human constructions. Analysis shows us just how they're constructed.

If we don't analyze them, **assumptions of their naturalness typically lead people to think of groups with “cultural difference” as “others”—us and them. This is called “othering.”** Once a group is othered, we tend to perceive them through a filter of “strangeness.” Groups further alienate each other by ranking constructed differences first and commonalities second. When alienation is combined with a fundamental belief in the naturalness of hierarchy—that is, a group believes their way is “right” or “superior” and the other group is “wrong” —then alienation blows up into enmity.

While this may seem obvious and natural it is actually a cultural choice. We could—and many do—believe that there are multiple, equally valid ways to construct human culture, and that we can learn from each other. Some would say that we can—and we must—learn to value our own beliefs while respecting those of others. It's just one small Earth so we're in this together. All of us, no matter our viewpoints, have a teaching in our culture

about the value of diversity. If you're grounded in the Bible, consider: why did Noah work so hard to make sure all creatures were represented on the yacht? If you're grounded in Indigenous knowledge, you've learned that we're all related. Both teach that we were all made by one creator. If you're grounded in science, you may think of creation, not creator, but the result is the same: you've learned that ecosystems are interdependent. **When something bridges opposing systems of thoughts, it is likely to be nature, not culture.**

Basically, the practice of **reflexivity examines how and when our beliefs contribute to intercultural misunderstanding and strife.** The mechanism is simple: identify our own filters and come to understand how they affect interpretation. Interpretation, of course, affects decisions and actions. A simple example of how a naturalized assumption can lead to misunderstanding is body language. To some, a horizontal shake of the head means no, while to others it means yes.

Another example is how different languages utilize common nouns and pronouns. In English we have gendered nouns for sibling: brother, sister. In Yoruba, one of the predominant languages in West Africa, siblings aren't gendered. There are words for older sibling and younger sibling, but not for sister and brother. English has gendered pronouns for he, she, her, him, and the inanimate, manipulatable it. In Yoruba, pronouns aren't gendered—every being is equal and designated by the same word. In English we don't gender objects such as chair, or floor. In Spanish and other Romance languages, all objects are gendered: *la silla*, the chair, is feminine, *el piso*, the floor, is masculine.

These differences generate questions. We can ask ourselves how dealing with a gendered language would affect the experience of Yoruba people when they were brought to the Americas as slaves. We can ask how it would affect the way they transmitted their values to their children who were born here. We can ask how it affects our understanding of literature translated from Yoruba. For example, suppose a Yoruba story mentions God and in a subsequent sentence refers to God with a pronoun. An accurate translation sounds clumsy and repetitive to English speakers: “God created the world and”—and now we must choose a gender—“when He or She was done, he or she rested.” Translations typically just use He. We lose the essence of Yoruba theology, in which God is a force beyond personalization.

Examples like these just scratch the surface of what we can learn about cultural schemas. While these are extreme examples, more subtle examples arise all the time. You will encounter schemas that differ from your own on a daily basis, and these can help you realize your own assumptions. These realizations can shift your mode of questioning.

There are two ways you can do this: directly (self-exploration) and indirectly (try putting oneself in another's shoes and look for resistance or blockages to that process). As an Indigenous Elder quipped, **“If you want to understand something, you need to stand under it”** (Larry Matrious-iban, 2008). In reflexivity, the goal is to understand yourself. How do you stand under yourself? That sounds tricky, but it can be simple. For example, upon encountering Yoruba schemas, instead of asking “how does lack of gendering in

language effect Yoruba understanding of the world,” we can ask, “in what ways do we unthinkingly apply gender in our own lives?” Discovering our own schemas and setting aside those filters, we can hear without "othering."

Cultural Schemas and Stereotypes

There are three basic dynamics involved in how we internalize cultural schemas:

1. each individual experience is unique.
2. individual experiences are conditioned by social forces that rely on social markers of difference.
3. we each negotiate between our individuality and social conditioning.

What do we mean when we speak of uniqueness? Simply put, there are as many experiences as there are people. Even within one family, we are aware of ways our experiences differ, so that certain kinds of experience are specific to each individual. This can be easy to keep in mind as we look inward, and harder to maintain as we look outward. It's counterproductive to apply conclusions from limited experiences to everyone who shares a social marker with those involved in the experience. For example, if your father is an alcoholic, this does not mean all men are alcoholics. Neither does it mean that all alcoholics are men. By reflecting on our own uniqueness, we can remember that everyone else is unique, too. Knowing ourselves helps us understand the complexity of others.

What do we mean by “social marker”? Whenever people appear in the public sphere, they are identified according to various markers. In the US, the most prevalent are class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, appearance, dis/ability, age, religion. We have been taught to assume a great deal about another person's experiences almost instantly. We observe the person's sex, appearance, body type and shape, clothing, way of moving and accent, automobile, neighborhood, and so on. From things like these we're taught to assume we know what kind of person they are, what they think and feel, and what they feel or think about us.

We're fed stereotypes from the minute we can toddle up to a TV or understand the words pouring out of a radio, and, they're constantly reinforced. In academic settings, they can be reinforced by texts written by people who see things through glasses they don't even know they have on their faces; we have a tendency to assume everyone sees the way we see. What do we mean by that? As the expression goes, “history is written by the victors.” We've become very familiar with this concept as applied to women and people of color—where are the mainstream books that chronicle, for example, Black inventors, Women composers, Indigenous philosophers, and so on?

We're very knowledgeable about stereotypes; what we may not know is how much they condition us. With a little thought, we can realize that we all have glasses on our faces through which we filter the world, and, we look at ourselves through them, too, when we look in the mirror. We already know all the stereotypes all too well, but what we may not know are the details of the prescription and extent to which our supposedly personal

glasses are socially influenced. **We encounter stereotypes daily and it is up to each of us to question them.** Keeping in mind the tension between unique individuality and social markers can alert us to challenging issues raised by intercultural experience

Practicing Reflexivity

All culture is transmitted through stories. Chances are everybody in a given story will have a slightly different version; in an intercultural story the differences may be bigger. It may help to utilize another anthropological concept about experience:

<u>Etic</u>	<u>Emic</u>
objective	subjective
logic	feelings
analytical	creative
outsider	insider

Some theorists prefer the “etic” approach of putting yourself outside the topic and considering it objectively. Others say nobody can be completely objective: our thinking is shaped by cultural schemas. The opposite approach is called “emic”—identify with something or someone in order to feel the experience from inside. This can allow a deeper perception of something that would otherwise be strange to us. It can help establish the grounds on which we can talk with those with different views.

In reality, we dance between them. When we read, we hope to truly listen. When we write, we want to present ourselves as believable authorities on our topics. The need to speak with, not for, another who we can never claim to "be" complicates the relationship between our “passionate” and “logical” selves.

Assignment

Reflexivity takes it a step further: it asks you to step outside your own self. Try this exercise. It takes about 10-15 minutes a day for 4 days, then 25 minutes on Day Five for a total of 1 ½ hours. Start it in the middle of Week One. You will then be ready to discuss it during Week Two:

Day One: Think of a music video, scene from a movie or a TV show, or story that disturbed you. Don't go too deep: do not trigger PTSD.

Identify what exactly bothered you. If possible, associate it with a social marker. What really pushed your buttons? Age? Body shape? Skin color? Language? Economic status? For example, you might examine your cultural schema about body image. Media tells most of us that there is something wrong with our faces and bodies. If you believe it—sometimes against your better judgement—you may believe you are inadequate. Choose just one belief, write about it, and put it aside.

10 Minutes. Let yourself write freely: nobody but you will read this.

Day Two: Think about one of your own patterns of thinking related to the social marker that disturbed you on Day One. Imagine the pattern as a design. Write about this and/or draw this—it's not an art project, so even a rough sketch is fine.

To continue the example, you could consider what we learned above about language and gender. Do you believe that as a male or female you should look a certain way? Do body shape and femaleness interact in the same way as body shape and maleness? What kinds of variations will represent this in your design?

10 Minutes. Let yourself write and draw freely: nobody but you will see this.

Day Three: Think about a pattern related to another social marker. Add this pattern to your design and notice how it interacts with the other patterns.

15 Minutes. Let yourself write and draw freely: nobody but you will read this.

Day Four: Imagine the finished interacting patterns as designs on a carpet spread below your feet. This is your “ground of being,” an organizational grid that explains your cultural experiences. Now roll up the carpet and put it in the corner. Think of it as putting aside patterns that previously shaped your understanding of the text. You can also think of it as taking off the glasses through which you usually view the world. Don't worry—it's right there beside you and you can return to it at will. But try out that bare floor, naked eyes feeling with no preconceptions.

Now give the text the floor. If it's a video, play it again. If it's in your mind, replay it there. What does it say when it speaks for itself, without your usual filters?

25 Minutes. Let yourself write and draw freely: nobody but you will read this. Then look over your notes from the entire experience and decide what you do want to share in discussion.

Conclusion

Can we really completely set aside our filters? No, not usually, and not easily. But reflexivity teaches that whenever we have a strong reaction to something, we can assume it's because it confirms or challenges one of our cultural schemas. We can take a step back, hold up a mirror, and examine our reactions to better understand our own culture. We can then more fully understand cultural differences.

We may always be an outsider, but by temporarily viewing the world without our preconceptions, we can engage across differences more effectively. This may seem similar to the rhetorical exercise of debating a position in which you do not believe, just to sharpen your ability to argue a point. But there is something more than any one point at stake here: the ability to communicate with people across differences can lead to alliances and alter political landscapes. With these thoughts in mind, please try the exercise and engage in discussion.

