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**Constructing Intercultural Learning**  
(Why Does It Seem So Clear, Yet Remain So Elusive?)


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## PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Paradigm changes in the goals of study abroad
- Paradigmatic confusion in goals of study abroad
- Paradigmatic confusion of ethicality in study abroad
- A framework for coupling ethical development with intercultural learning

Executive Summary: How we tend to shoot ourselves in the educational foot and how we could avoid it



## UNIVERSALIST (NEWTONIAN) PARADIGM

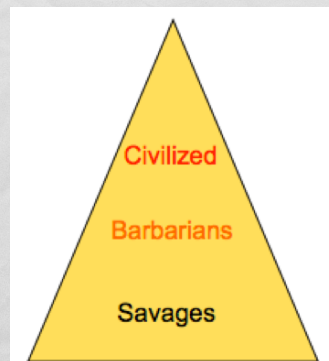


## UNIVERSALISM

- Reality has an objective existence: looking in the same direction, every observer sees the same thing.
- Different forms of civilization are just better or worse variations on the single reality



## THE HIERARCHY OF CIVILIZATION




## UNIVERSALIST IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDY ABROAD

- Study abroad was about assessing the civilization of others and becoming more civilized one's self (Junior year abroad)
- Since objective observers can all see the same objective reality, no preparation other than etiquette tips was necessary for cross-cultural contact
- The goal was to become more cosmopolitan, not necessarily more interculturally competent

## CULTURAL POSITIVISM

### THE ICEBERG METAPHOR FOR CULTURE



## POSITIVIST INTERCULTURALISM

- **CULTURE**
  - culture is like an iceberg, with 10% visible and 90% hidden
- **INTERCULTURAL LEARNING**
  - by discovering hidden culture, dangers are avoided and secrets to effective action are unlocked
  - empirical knowledge of cultural variation is sufficient to allow beneficial cross-cultural interaction to occur
  - Attitudes and skills are epiphenomenal to contact

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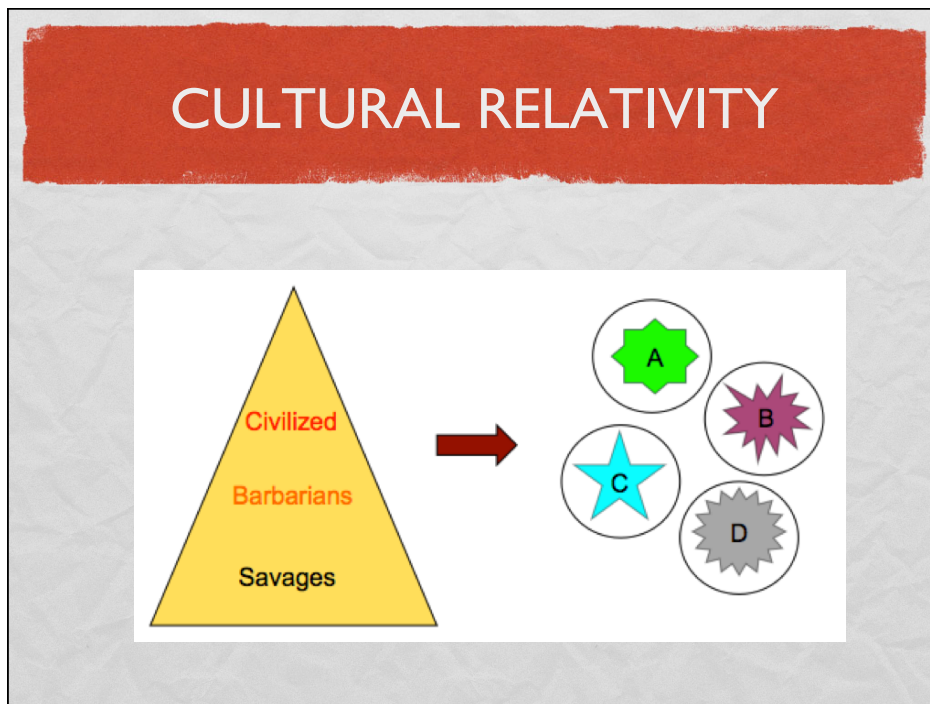


## RELATIVIST (EINSTEINIAN) PARADIGM



## RELATIVISM

- While an absolute reality exists, it cannot be perceived objectively since all observers exist in systems that limit perspective
- Civilization must be understood in terms of its own perspective (cultural relativity)



## RELATIVISTIC INTERCULTURALISM

- **CULTURE**
  - Culture is like a big family system, with various roles and rules
  - In extreme relativism (postmodernism), the idea of culture itself is a neocolonialist imposition of “Western” hegemony
- **INTERCULTURAL LEARNING**
  - Cultural self-awareness – a recognition of perspective (colored glasses) – is necessary
  - Only categories indigenous to a context can be used to describe phenomena in that context; therefore all description is ideographic. Nomothetic, comparative data obscures the true diversity of humanity
  - Every person exists in his/her own individual context, and cultural generalizations should be avoided because they contradict the uniqueness of individuals



## RELATIVIST IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDY ABROAD

- Study abroad is about having a cross-cultural experience and understanding a different cultural perspective
- Preparation for cross-cultural contact generally includes experiential awareness training about one's own and the target culture
- Short term assimilation is the likely goal of both sojourner and host

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## CONSTRUCTIVIST (QUANTUM) PARADIGM



## CONSTRUCTIVISM

- Reality (including ourselves) is co-created through our interaction with our environment (including others)
- Culture is both the collective process of constructing reality and its product



## CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERCULTURALISM

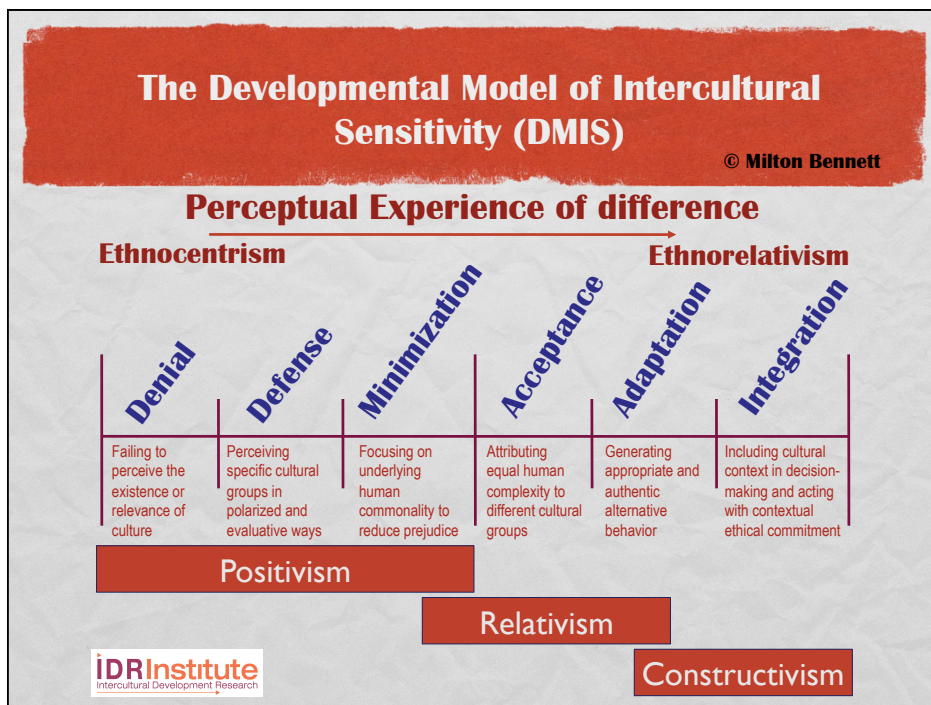
- CULTURE
  - Culture is an observational category constructed for the purpose of identifying patterns within groups
- INTERCULTURAL LEARNING
  - The purpose of knowledge is to enable enacting the experience of an alternative cultural context: experiential, embodied learning
  - The precursor condition for learning is intercultural sensitivity -- the ability to perceive and experience cultural difference



## CONSTRUCTIVIST IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDY ABROAD

- Study abroad is about acquiring intercultural competence and global/multicultural citizenship
- Preparation for cross-cultural contact stresses developmental training in intercultural communication and learning-to-learn techniques
- The goal is acquiring transferable strategies for intercultural adaptation (not assimilation)





## PARADIGMATIC CONFUSION

- We say we want participants to appreciate cultural differences (relativism), but we assume that the differences are obvious to anyone looking in that direction (positivism)
  - Result: Inadequate cultural preparation
- We say we want participants to become more interculturally competent (constructivism), but we assume that contact with cultural difference is sufficient (relativism)
  - Result: Inadequate intercultural preparation



## PARADIGMATIC CONFUSION OF ETHICALITY

- We say we want participants to appreciate cultural differences (relativism) but in the face of ethical ambiguity we revert to absolute standards (positivism)
  - Result: Intercultural development is stuck at Minimization, at best
- We say we want participants to develop intercultural adaptation strategies (constructivism), but we have no constructive alternative to situational ethics (relativism)
  - Result: Intercultural development is stuck at Appreciation, at best





