

Intercultural competence and effectiveness in professional contexts

In order to be/become effective in one's dealings with people from different cultural backgrounds perhaps nothing is quite as important as the ability to adequately interpret the social, situational and interactional context in which a conversation is taking place. This ability forms a prerequisite to choosing appropriate interactional and behavioural strategies. It forms a competency that applies in particular to sensitive situations. In my research on disagreeing behaviour in two different cultural contexts, the way in which people negotiate conflict in such potentially face-threatening situations has been found to differ starkly. The impact of these differences can have severe and harmful consequences on intercultural relations. It appears to be necessary for effective dealings across cultures to interpret behaviours in the light of the interactants' culturally influenced behavioural preferences, expectations and orientations. This includes for example differences in orientation towards disagreement (is disagreement to be avoided and carefully negotiated or is it acceptable and non-threatening), differences in rapport management (what weight is placed on the building/maintenance of interpersonal relations in a transaction) or the importance and manifestation of face-concepts. In this paper I not only discuss differences in orientation towards disagreement and the resolution (or lack thereof) of conflict, but also intercultural competencies that enable us to better predict and respond to cultural differences in conflict situations.