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# Cultural Awareness in Intercultural Mentoring: A Model for Enhancing Mentoring Relationships

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Increasing ethnic diversity in both the domestic workforce and in multinational organizations creates opportunities for the formation of intercultural mentoring relationships. This paper explores the influence of cultural dimensions on intercultural mentoring, drawing on the findings of the GLOBE Project (House, Hanges, Javida, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) and presents a conceptual model of cultural awareness and how such awareness can influence mentoring effectiveness. A review of the literature yields an integrative definition of cultural awareness that incorporates general cultural awareness, cultural self-awareness, and situation specific awareness in order to adopt a third-culture perspective in intercultural interactions that result in culturally appropriate behavior that enhances the relationship between mentor and mentee. The cultural awareness model promises to be significant for intercultural mentors by providing practitioners a paradigm through which to evaluate their mentoring relationships in order to enrich understanding between mentor and mentee with a view of improving mentoring outcomes.

Culture influences virtually every aspect of life, from one's general perspective or outlook on the world to the understanding of what constitutes socially acceptable behavior. Culture can be defined broadly as "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations" (House, Hanges, Javida, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004, p. 15). "It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1997, p. 5).

The increase of ethnic diversity in the U.S. workforce, along with the expansion of organizations into the global arena, has opened the door to unprecedented communication and interaction across cultures, bringing along with it the challenges of cultural understanding (House et al., 2004; Marquardt & Horvath, 2001; Tullett, 1997; Tung, 1997). Leaders today are faced with an array of such challenges that require cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). "When working on global teams or in other countries, the ability to


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think outside your own culture and see an issue through the eyes of another is critical to success" ("World without Walls," 2003, p. 59). Apart from serving as a challenge to the ever-present danger of ethnocentrism, this ability to see beyond one's own culture promotes empathy for others while encouraging a degree of critical thinking about one's own cultural position.

The terms *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* are often used interchangeably. However, in order to delineate more precisely the scope of this study, *cross-cultural* is defined as the "comparison of cultural differences or situations in which such differences exist" (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. xii). The term *intercultural* is used to describe the "actual interaction between people of different cultures" (p. xii). This paper employs the term *intercultural mentoring* to portray the interactive relationship when mentor and mentee come from different cultures. The purpose of this article is to explore the influence of cultural awareness upon intercultural mentoring relationships and to present a conceptual model that reflects the relationship between the two.

## Intercultural Mentoring

Though leaders may accept the need to practice mentoring in the context of their leadership functions in order to develop followers and to improve organizational outcomes, mentoring relationships in intercultural settings pose unique challenges. As previously defined, *intercultural mentoring relationship* describes the relationship when mentor and mentee are from different cultures. Both mentor and mentee bring to the relationship values and assumptions that are culturally based. By understanding the influence of culture on attitudes, expectations, and behaviors, leaders may increase their cultural awareness and improve intercultural mentoring practices.

### *Culturally Appropriate Behavior*

Ting-Toomey (1999), citing Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), defined appropriateness as "the degree to which behaviors are regarded as proper and match the expectations generated by the culture" (p. 48). A survey of the relevant literature leads to the conclusion that what is deemed as culturally appropriate behavior arises from cultural sensitivity, cultural empathy, and cultural competence. Taken together, these constructs establish a framework for understanding what is considered culturally appropriate behavior in an intercultural context.

Bennett (1986) presented a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, using as the key organizing principle the concept of *difference, "*that cultures differ fundamentally in the way they create and maintain world views" (p. 181). He argued that individuals who accept the principle of cultural difference can grow in intercultural sensitivity and in effectiveness of intercultural communication. His model illustrates a continuum of six stages of personal growth from *ethnocentrism*: (a) the denial of cultural difference, (b) the defense against difference, and (c) the minimization of difference; to *ethnorelativism*: (d) the acceptance of difference, (e) the adaptation to difference, and (f) the integration of cultural difference into one's life.

Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) offered a definition of intercultural sensitivity as "a sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (p. 414). They described intercultural sensitivity as being characterized by interest in other cultures, sensitivity to notice cultural differences, and the willingness to modify behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures.


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Cultural empathy "involves a temporary shift in frame of reference such that one construes events 'as if' one were the other person" (Bennett, 1986, p. 185). Referring to the adaptation stage of Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) noted that cultural empathy exists when "people not only accept cultural differences but are able to empathize with individuals from other cultures and change their behaviors when interacting with them" (p. 64). Mullavey-O'Byrne (1997) described cultural empathy as the "individual's ability to understand others within the framework of their cultural backgrounds and the facility to communicate that understanding to them in a meaningful way" (p. 210). Just as sensitivity and empathy are closely related in psychology (cf. the Rogerian construct of *empathic understanding*; Siegel, 1999), the two constructs are difficult to differentiate in the realm of intercultural interactions.

Cultural competence or effectiveness can be seen as the behavioral outcome of cultural awareness. Collier (1989) stated that "cultural competence is conduct which is appropriate and effective for the particular cultural identity being adopted at the time in the particular situation" (p. 296). It is "mutually competent behavior for both cultural identities being advanced" (p. 297), that is, for both the cultural identity of the sojourner and that of the host. This perspective of appropriate conduct in relation to both cultures represented in intercultural interactions hints of a third-culture perspective that is treated below. Ruben (1976) reflected this emphasis on the individual relating to both cultures by defining intercultural communication competence as "the ability to function in a manner that is perceived to be relatively consistent with the needs, capacities, goals, and expectations of the individuals in one's environment while satisfying one's own needs, capacities, goals, and expectations" (p. 336).

*Meaningful Mentoring Relationships*

Culturally appropriate behavior facilitates meaningful mentoring relationships. Meaningful in this context is synonymous with *effective* and, according to Ting-Toomey (1999), reflects "the degree to which communicators achieve shared meanings and desirable outcomes in a given situation" (p. 48). There is obviously a good deal more that can be said regarding what is appropriate or meaningful from different cultural perspectives. Mentoring relationships provide an appealing context for exploring the perceived and relative importance of cultural awareness in the development of intercultural relationships. The influence of cultural dimensions on mentoring relationships is critical to establishing meaningful mentoring relationships.

Because individuals bring their cultural values into personal relationships, the culturally aware mentor will understand that cultural dimensions may significantly influence his or her intercultural interactions with mentees (Irvin, 2007). While in-group collectivism leads people to emphasize personal relationships over tasks (House et al., 2004), individualist cultural tendencies like those found in the US and Great Britain cause people generally to prefer focusing on task accomplishment, such as starting and ending meetings on time. We know more than one American expatriate who thinks tardiness is evidence of weak character and a lack of professionalism. Intercultural mentors from individualist societies could increase their effectiveness with mentees who are from more collectivist societies by acting upon the implications of collectivism that focuses on relationship building, even at the expense of schedules and timely task accomplishment.

In-group collectivism affects trust between individuals. Individualists tend to be universalistic in their willingness to trust people and give them the benefit of the doubt.


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Collectivists on the other hand tend to be particularistic, extending trust only to those from within their in-group. When someone attempts to interact with people from an out-group—be it from outside the family, social group, or region—trust must be earned slowly by consistency of character and by proof of benevolence. For this reason, “in a collectivist society a relationship of trust should be established with another person before any business can be done” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 67). This trust leads to the adoption of others into the in-group. The application to mentoring is clear. In collectivist cultures, the mentor who is intent on “getting through the materials” at the cost of informal relationship building with the mentee will find it more difficult to develop the trust that is foundational to the mentoring relationship as a whole.

Because of the importance of the in-group in collectivist societies, harmony is a key value. Personal confrontation is normally considered rude, and one tries to avoid saying no to others as that would imply a confrontation. Communication can be very indirect. A mentee from a collectivist country will normally not dare to contradict his or her mentor, but may express agreement that does not imply—from the mentee’s perspective—any real commitment. People from individualist countries, on the other hand, believe that speaking the truth openly, even if it causes conflict, is both virtuous and healthy (Hofstede, 1997). When the mentor and mentee are from distinct cultural backgrounds, the possibility of miscommunication is great. Misunderstandings, even of an ethical nature, can arise that undermine the viability of the mentoring relationship.

The effective, culturally aware mentor who takes into account the cultural tendencies of the mentee and attempts to provide responses that are both faithful to the mentor’s natural tendencies as well are sensitive to the mentee’s cultural expectations, may increase mentoring effectiveness (Rosinski, 2003). In addition to these moderating responses is the possibility of an intercultural learning agenda in which both mentee and mentor first learn more about each other’s cultural expectations before finalizing their mentoring agreement. While this awareness of the other is commonly expected (if not always delivered) in foreign situations, such as the preparation of expatriates, diplomats, or missionaries for overseas postings, its relevance for domestic situations may be even more significant and affect a broad range of issues related to diversity and the work environment.

While the construct of cultural dimensions informs cultural awareness, those involved in an intercultural mentoring relationship should guard against stereotyping. The dimensions reflect *central tendencies* and are not meant to describe personality traits of individuals (Hofstede, 1997; House et al., 2004). However, as Hofstede (1984) noted, “attempts at the transfer of leadership skills which do not take the values of subordinates into account have little chance of success” (p. 260).

### *Specific Mentoring Outcomes*

When initiating the foray into intercultural mentoring, mentors can begin by exploring those dimensions that reflect the greatest difference between their culture and the culture of the mentee. For example, one of the greatest cultural differences between the United States and Colombia is in the in-group collectivism dimension, in which the U.S. has one of the lowest scores and Colombia is near the top of societies that most endorse in-group collectivist practices (House et al., 2004). A mentor from the United States should understand that if the mentee indeed reflects the general cultural values of Colombia, then the mentor must gain the trust of the mentee through spending significant time in building the personal relationship. The mentee may


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communicate acceptance of the mentor's suggestions and opinions in deference to the mentor's role and in order to maintain a harmonious relationship. However, this overt acceptance does not necessarily mean there is absolute agreement and commitment on the part of the mentee. Some of the communication, particularly of delicate issues, may hinge on *indirectos*, or indirect statements that carry subtle meanings. The mentor should be careful to correct or reprove the mentee in a culturally sensitive way that will not cause him or her to lose face or question the security of the relationship. An awareness of the distinction between manifest (declared and obvious) and latent acceptance and the constant significance of verbal and non-verbal cues can be major factors that affect both the form and the structure of the mentoring relationship.

High power distance may produce an aversion to disagree with a superior, leading to avoidance of conflict (Hofstede, 1984). In order to avoid what he or she perceives to be a stifling hierarchical relationship, a low power distance mentor may want to limit his or her mentoring efforts to informal relationships that are based on factors other than organizational structures (Siegel, 1999). Even in informal mentoring relationships, however, cultural values come into play. The low power-distance mentor who enjoys lively interchanges and disagreements may become frustrated when faced with the higher power-distance mentee's non-confrontational silence, misinterpreting the silence as an indication of a dysfunctional relationship (Salzman, 2000, p. 122). By taking into account the power distance dimension, both mentor and mentee can grow in an understanding of one another in order to sustain and improve the relationship.

Superiors in collectivist cultures will normally not discuss the performance of a subordinate directly with him or her. Mentors in these contexts should seek more subtle, indirect forms of communication that will allow the mentee to avoid loss of face and a loss of security in the relationship. When the mentee does not meet the mentor's expectations, the termination of the mentoring relationship is perhaps too drastic (Hofstede, 1997). Loyalty and trust take precedence over task-oriented expectations. This greatly influences the final phase of mentoring when the relationship transitions. Individualist-oriented mentors may want to transition out of relationships with collectivist mentees only to find that the mentees may become offended and may feel rejected and abandoned by such a thought.

## Cultural Awareness Leading to a Third-Culture Perspective

The term *cultural awareness* is not easily defined and is often employed analogously in the literature with constructs such as cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural competence, and cross-cultural effectiveness (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeirer & Zenk, 1994). Much of the difficulty surrounding the use of this term probably inheres in the word *awareness*, which is almost by definition open to varying and even conflicting interpretations. A review of some of these terms and how researchers define, operationalize, and apply them to intercultural interactions can help bring the concept of cultural awareness into better focus. See Table 1 for a summary of the following review.


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Table 1: Some Operationalizations of Cultural Awareness

| Term | Key Principle | Description | Author |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Sensitivity | "Difference" | 6 stages from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism | Bennett (1986) |
| | "Sensitivity" | (a) interest in other cultures; (b) notice of cultural differences; (c) modify behavior as mark of respect for other cultures | Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) |
| | Perceptual Schema | (a) accurate cultural schema (b) ideographic data | Ridley et al. (1994) |
| Cultural Empathy | Frame of reference | Temporary shift in frame of reference | Bennett (1986) |
| | Cultural differences | Change behavior when interacting with others | Brislin & Yoshida (1994) |
| | Communicating understanding | Sensitivity and empathy | Mullavey-O'Byrne (1997) |
| Mindfulness | Readiness to shift one's frame of readiness | (a) Mindlessness (reactive stage) (b) Mindfulness (proactive stage) | Ting-Toomey (1999) |
| Cultural Competence | Appropriate conduct | Mutually competent behavior | Collier (1989) |
| | "Intercultural communication competence" | Intercultural Behavioral Assessment Indices | Ruben (1976) |
| | "Functional Awareness" | Management of behavior in intercultural contexts. | Hoopes (1981) |

*General Cultural Awareness*

The constructs of cultural sensitivity, empathy, mindfulness, and competence with their respective nuances reveal the multifaceted character of cultural awareness. At least three different levels of analysis of cultural awareness can be discerned. First of all, one can speak of *general cultural awareness*, that is, "generally aware that identity is shaped by cultural influences" (Singelis & Pedersen, 1997, p. 190). Hoopes and Pusch (1981) followed this line of thought, describing what they termed *cross-cultural awareness* as referring "to the basic ways of learning that behavior and ways of thinking and perceiving are culturally conditioned rather than being universal aspects of human nature" (p. 7). Hoopes (1981) explained, "The first step out of ethnocentrism is to become aware that other culture groups exist as something other than the enemy—even if they are still classified as peculiar" (p. 19).


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*Cultural Self-Awareness*

The second level of analysis can be called *cultural self-awareness*. This is the awareness and knowledge of "the degree to which [one's] perceptions and [one's] behaviors are culturally conditioned" (Hoopes, 1981, p. 16). Brislin and Yoshida (1994) described four awareness competencies. The first is self-awareness, being aware of the way one's life has been shaped by one's own culture. Second is the consciousness of one's own values and biases and their effects on the way one engages in intercultural interactions. Third is the necessity of becoming comfortable with cultural differences. Fourth is sensitivity to circumstances. Stewart and Bennett (1991) argued for the importance of cultural self-awareness in order to contrast one's cultural attributes with those of individuals from other cultures, contributing to self-understanding as a cultural being.

*Situation-Specific Awareness*

General cultural awareness and cultural self-awareness are foundational for the third level of cultural awareness that can be coined *situation-specific awareness*. At this level of analysis, "awareness is the ability to accurately judge a cultural situation from both one's own and the other's cultural viewpoint" (Pedersen, 2000, p. 4). Chen (1992) presented this approach as requiring participants to "understand their own cultural values and examine contrasts with the host culture in order to apply the insights to improve intercultural competence" (p. 12). Treated by some intercultural training literature as a separate step toward effective intercultural interaction (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Sue et al., 1982), culture-specific knowledge informs sojourners' awareness and enables them to respond more competently in intercultural situations. Pedersen (2000) argued for the importance of both *etic* (culture-general) knowledge and *emic* (culture-specific) knowledge. The terms etic and emic come from the words *phonetic* and *phonemic,* but are applied to cultural behavior as a whole (Pike, 1982).

> The etic approach looks at behavior from the outside for the purpose of comparing cultures. Categories of behavior are imposed on observation. The emic approach, on the other hand, attempts to discover how a system looks from the inside, so ordinarily only one culture is studied at a time and comparison is not a matter of immediate interest. The categories and rules of behavior are derived from the user's point of view. (Jones, 1979, p. 57)

A good example of how this might apply is the intercultural context within which foreign missionaries typically have to work. Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou (1999) argued that emic and etic views should not be divorced from one another:

> Missionaries must begin by learning to see the world as the people they serve do. They must also develop metacultural [etic] grids for describing and comparing cultures, while, at the same time, constantly returning to emic analysis to make certain they do not misunderstand the particular people they serve. They are participant-observers—as participants they identify with and seek to understand the people they serve, and as observers they study, compare, and evaluate different cultures. (p. 23)


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The etic perspective, or *metacultural grid*, corresponds to an analytical framework outside of any specific culture (Hiebert et al., 1999), comparable to Ridley et al.'s (1994) construct of perceptual schema discussed above. Similarly, Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978) citing Gudykunst, Wiseman, and Hammer (1977) made the case for a *third-culture perspective* as essential for effective intercultural interactions. They described this construct as

> A psychological perspective the sojourner uses in interpreting and evaluating intercultural encounters. This third-culture perspective is neither from the sojourner's own culture nor from the host culture. Rather it is a frame of reference for understanding intercultural interactions in general. The third-culture perspective acts as a psychological link between the sojourner's own cultural perspective (i.e., assumptions, values, learned behaviors, etc.) and the perspective of another culture. (Hammer et al., p. 384)

Another way of interpreting this third-culture perspective is as a new composite which, while developed from the individual perspectives of each cultural actor, nevertheless transcends these localized or specific perspectives, presenting an alternate, or *third-view*, culture. Hammer et al. (1978) went on to note seven characteristics of a third-culture perspective:

> First of all is open-mindedness toward new ideas and experiences. Second is the ability to empathize with people from other cultures. Third, accuracy in perceiving differences and similarities between the sojourner's own culture and the host culture. Fourth, is an attitude of being nonjudgmental. The fifth characteristic is that of being an astute, non-critical observer of one's own and of other people's behavior. Sixth is the ability to establish meaningful relationships with people in the host culture. Finally, one who demonstrates a third-culture perspective is less ethnocentric. (p. 384)

On the basis of the preceding discussion, cultural awareness can be defined as the ability to adopt a third-culture perspective in intercultural interactions in order to enact culturally appropriate behavior and to establish meaningful relationships with individuals from cultures different from one's own. See Figure 1 for a conceptual model of integrated cultural awareness.


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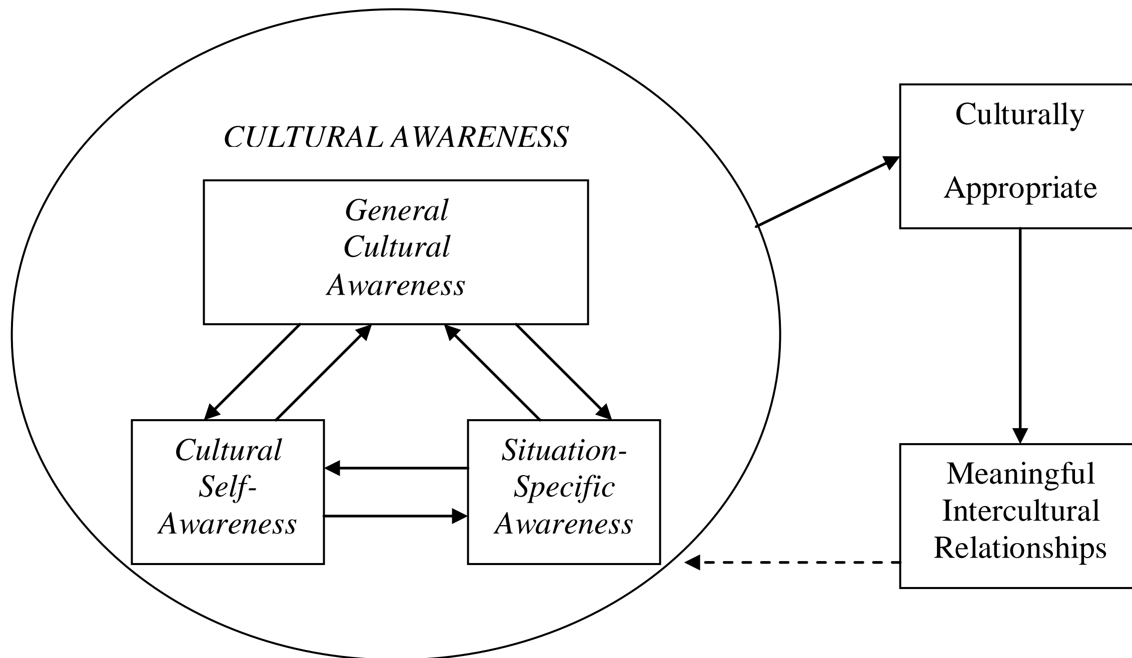


*Figure 1.* Integrative Cultural Awareness Model reflecting the components of general cultural awareness, cultural self-awareness, and situation-specific awareness that contribute to the development of a third-culture perspective resulting in culturally appropriate behavior and meaningful relationships.

## Implications for Leader Practitioners

Mentoring, as a leadership role, is subject to the same constraints that can hinder the effectiveness of expatriate leaders in cross-cultural settings (Brodbeck, Frese, Akerblom, Audia, Bakacsi, & Bendova, 2000). Leaders who seek to develop emerging leaders in intercultural contexts are faced with an array of cultural practices and expectations that can confound their strategies of leadership training and can thwart their well-intentioned mentoring strategies. This paper provides a conceptual framework to assist practitioners in not only deciphering the nuances of cultural differences, but in also applying principles of cultural awareness to intercultural mentoring relationships in order to improve mentoring outcomes. The relationship between cultural awareness and intercultural mentoring arises from the interactions of individuals seeking to develop a meaningful relationship that is mutually rewarding. The conceptual model in Figure 2 illustrates this relationship. As cultural awareness in the mentoring relationship increases, the relationship is enhanced as the mentor and mentee engage in culturally appropriate behavior that affects the mentoring outcomes.

For example, the mentor-mentee relationship can be described as a power relationship (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). Conceptions of power distance may have significant influence over how the mentoring relationship is defined by each of the participants. For example, subordinates in low power distance countries may prefer loose supervision and participative decision-making while in high power distance cultures, subordinates may expect close supervision and more directive leadership (Hofstede, 1984). Mentees from high power distance countries may desire that their mentors to be more directive, possibly leaving a mentor


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from a low power distance background confused why the mentee is not self-motivated. The consequences of this for the development of the relationship can be significant and range from a sense on the part of mentee that the mentor is not properly mentoring him or her, to the feeling of the mentor that the mentee is less than adequate or lacks initiative. A fuller understanding of the significance of cultural awareness to the mentoring relationship may assist in measuring the depth and validity of these as well as other misperceptions.

Although leaders are often instructed in such topics as management principles and motivational techniques, the model of cultural awareness forces the leader to adopt the posture of a student of cultures, both of his or her own culture as well as of the culture of the mentee. Organizations with existing mentoring strategies of leadership development in intercultural contexts can enhance those strategies by introducing potential mentors and mentees to this cultural awareness model, contributing to the enhancement of intercultural mentoring relationships.

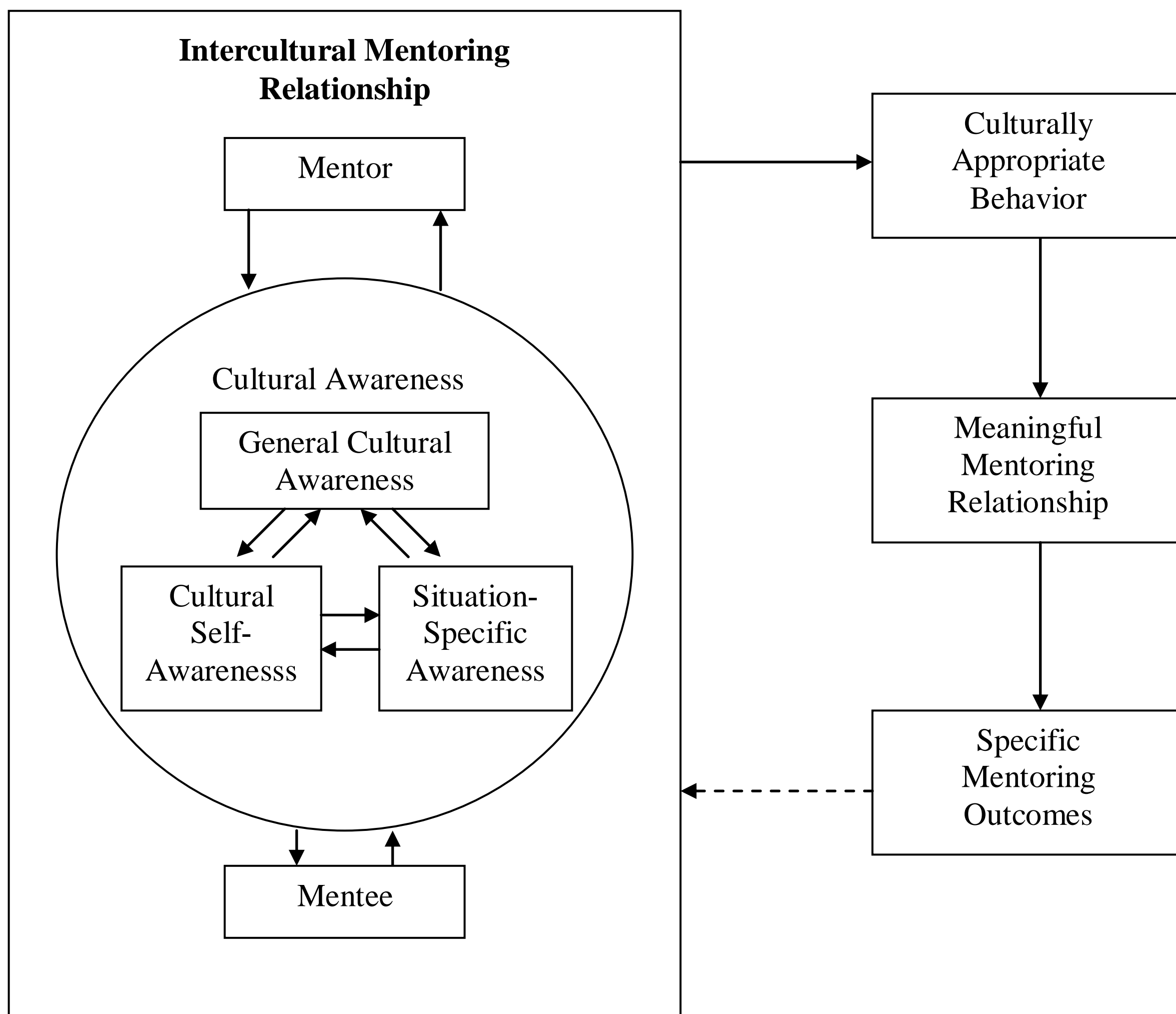


*Figure 2.* Conceptual model of the relationship between cultural awareness and intercultural mentoring relationships.


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## Application of the Conceptual Model

Analyzing the effects of culture on intercultural mentoring relationships, Murphy and Ensher (1997) noted five phases of the mentoring process that are influenced by cultural values: (a) attraction that leads to the establishment of a mentor-mentee relationship; (b) contracting, the definition of roles, and the evaluation of costs and benefits for each one; (c) growth in trust and sharing of information through increased contact; (d) maturation, the stabilization of the relationship marked by value congruence, and reciprocal support; and (e) transition, the decision to either end the relationship or move it to a different level such as informal friendship (pp. 217-228).

In applying the model of the relationship between cultural awareness and intercultural mentoring relationships, attraction may be increased as mentees identify in potential mentors the awareness of cultural values that directly influence the mentoring relationship. Negotiating the definition of roles in the relationship normally carries cultural expectations of power distance. Growth and maturation will depend in large part on effective communication, decision-making, and conflict management. The transition of the relationship could be shorter or longer, depending on the cultural values in play. High individualist cultures value separation and independence while high collectivist cultures value relationships of indefinite duration, comparable to that of the Latin American figure of the *padrino* (similar to a godfather) or more generalized *patron* in other societies. At every stage of the intercultural mentoring relationship, the mentee's development will benefit by the mentor's ability to exercise integrated cultural awareness in order to assume a third-culture perspective that leads to appropriate behavior and meaningful relationships.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a conceptual model of cultural awareness that integrates aspects of general cultural awareness, self-awareness, and situation-specific awareness in order to adopt a third-culture perspective that results in culturally appropriate behavior and in meaningful relationships. The focus of the paper has been upon the application of a cultural awareness model to intercultural mentoring relationships, arguing that such relationships require that mentors exercise cultural awareness in order to achieve desirable outcomes that benefit mentees.
In light of the cultural influence upon mentoring relationships and of the unique challenges posed by intercultural mentoring relationships, organizations should explore means to increase cultural awareness between mentors and mentees, which can benefit all their workers given that mentoring relationships may be formed both formally and informally. Leaders who desire to incorporate mentoring into their own leadership repertoire should take into account the cultural nuances that mentees bring to mentoring relationships and capitalize upon this awareness in order to improve interactions with mentees.

Specific arenas in which the intercultural mentoring model could be tested include multinational corporations, international agencies, and the missions activities of churches. In addition to overseas research, the relevance of this study to local situations is obvious. Future research into the application of the cultural awareness model should include case studies of intercultural mentoring dyads with a focus on mentoring practices that are culturally relevant. A part of this research should include the search for etic (universal) mentoring practices that could benefit mentoring relationships across many contexts. Cross-cultural studies could explore emic


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(culture-specific) mentoring models in an effort to identify those practices in comparison to other cultures. Also, measuring the level of cultural awareness among intercultural mentors and observing its effects upon mentoring outcomes could test this conceptual model. By increasing the knowledge of intercultural mentoring relationships and how they develop and function, culturally diverse organizations will have a greater opportunity to see mentoring outcomes improved and leadership skills better developed.

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