# "Defensiveness" – A Stage of Development: An Interview with Milton and Janet Bennett

"In our review of most of the developmental models, they all point to basically the same thing—a stage of identity development that resembles defensiveness," says Professor Milton Bennett. Professor Janet Bennett adds that "defensiveness" is recognized as a necessary step toward an identity that is not threatened by people with differing cultures and values. "This approach is based on being constructive, not adversarial," she adds.

Drs. Milton and Janet Bennett are directors of the Institute for Intercultural Communication in Portland, Oregon.

Milton observed that as people came into increased contact with those different from themselves, defensive reactions were a common part of the experience. As a result, he included "defense" as one of the early stages in his model, "Developing Intercultural Sensitivity."[1] The first three stages in the model, all representing ethnocentric views, are: denial, defense, minimization. Milton is one of the first to suggest a developmental process by which people acquire more accepting views of people different from themselves..

Do all people experience "defensiveness" in the same way? Milton doesn't think so. He points to developmental models for "ethnic identity" which indicate differences. He says that some behavior, which appears to be "defensive," may actually be part of the process to maintain cultural integrity, especially "where the dominant culture is attacking that identity."

What about defensive reactions on the part of a White North American person (perceived to be in the dominant societal position)? Milton distinguishes "active" defense from "passive" defense.

"In my model, I explain 'passive' defense in terms of 'denial'", he says. Either by isolation or separation, people try to protect their world view from the threat of change. "A person avoids any situation where the stability and predictability of their lives might be threatened," Milton explains.

In contrast, the person experiencing the "active" form of defense is more openly aggressive. Milton refers to this stage as "defense" in his model. "People in this stage are more aware of differences, but are uncomfortable with them and attempt to devalue the others," Milton explains. This stage is characterized by negative stereotypes and derogatory statements. These statements can be quite harsh—witness some of the statements being made by U.S. Navy men in regard to the "place" and "role" of women in the Navy. Milton says that people in this stage also emphasize their superiority over the group they perceive as threatening.

The purpose is to diminish the credibility of the threat. "People in this stage are doing everything in their power to protect the stability of their situation," notes Milton.

The word "process" is very significant here. Stop and check your perception. Do you conceptualize defensiveness as a stage in a process?

There is another way to look at defensive behavior–a way that reveals a different type of threat according to Milton, a threat to the "paradigm." This goes deeper than the differences of culture. He warns, "defending this position means defending the fundamental way you view the world." The person's reliance on "dualism" is threatened, which means explaining the world in terms of opposite categories: us or them, good or bad.

Shifting out of dualism has been identified as one of the outcomes of a college education.[3] In Milton's model, it means crossing over the line, where instead of "us" and "them," "you begin to see people interconnected and interdependent." This is a big mind shift. People try to avoid it; they cling to arguments of similarity, "We're all just human, everyone is the same." These are the kinds of statements made by people in the "minimization stage" of his model. He says minimizing differences is another way of defending our familiar view of reality from unknown differences.

Do the Bennetts have any new thoughts about how people move out of defense? Milton says they are looking more frequently at opportunities for people to engage in some kind of joint activity which "is not about their cultural differences." He points to activities that put people in situations where they have to depend on one another for survival, or activities where everyone plans a project together. "People cleaning up together after the riots in Los Angeles is a terrific example," he notes. A common activity of mutual support occurs without creating a new outside enemy.

The Bennetts also suggest activities that consider diversity within one's own group, but which do not encourage the

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"us" and "them" categories. Examples include learning style inventories or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. "These instruments allow people to look at the diversity within their own group," Milton states. He says you can point out different feelings people may have about each other, even within the "in" group. He adds this may help move forward the idea that, "you like some people, you dislike others." But cautions that this "minimization" effort does not represent the acceptance of cultural differences.

Janet Bennett offers another dimension to our thinking of people passing through defensive reactions. She suggests that as we think about people in different stages of development, we should consider their need for support and challenge.[4] "If someone needs challenge and they get too much support, they don't learn anything; if someone needs support and they get too much challenge, they will flee the learning task." She believes that people in defense are heavily challenged and need support.

Older workers, particularly those who have had to work very hard to get into their craft or occupational "in" group, may be highly conscious of in-group/out-group relations. They particularly need support. Janet says they may need to hear statements like, "Yes this is tough, but you are going to come out OK, you are a valuable employee, 'they' are not going to come in and take your job."

And Janet sums it up, "We are at such a crucial time—the dangers of thinking of ourselves only in opposition to each other has no usefulness."

[1]Milton J. Bennett, "A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10 (1986): 179-196.

[2]James A. Banks, "The stages of ethnic and cultural development," *Multicultural Education: Theory & Practice*, 2nd ed. (1981); Thomas A. Parham, "Cycles of Psychological Nigrescence," *The Counseling Psychologist,* 17.2 (1989): 187-226.

[3]William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, (1970)

[4]Nevitt Sanford, *Self & Society - Social Change and Individual Development*, (1966).

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