

# Stepping on Cultural and Religious Assumptions

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**THE “STEP ON JESUS” CONTROVERSY** that emerged at Florida Atlantic University in the spring of 2013 (Peterson, 2014) reminded me that we as intercultural trainers have a professional culture of our own. The exercise’s point, that “symbols are arbitrary,” is difficult to gainsay from the scientific perspectives that are most legitimate in our scholarly culture. I also found discussions about its ethical implications to be largely individualistic. They rest on a strong distinction between an individual student and their cultural community and on personal choice. Reflecting the dominant social science culture of business studies, our professional culture shows the influences of individualism and the scientific basis of legitimate discussions (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991; Hofstede, 1996). When we act as researchers, these qualities of our professional culture often serve us well. The community controversy surrounding the exercise, however, reminded me that when we act as intercultural trainers, we should reflect on our own professional culture. When we control a class of students, we should see them both as individuals and as points of intercultural contact between our own and their cultural communities. Many such communities have religious and other assumptions about legitimate knowledge claims that differ from those in our professional culture.

## Alternative Perspectives on “Arbitrary” Symbols

The tension that arose between the professional culture of intercultural trainers and some other cultures came from the point of the “step on Jesus” exercise that *all* symbols are arbitrary. This point rejects very deep, central elements of many cultures. From some religious standpoints, most symbols are created by people, but a few have been chosen by God. Within Christianity, one such symbol is the name *Jesus* when it refers to Christ. Within Islam, the name *Mohammed* when it refers to the Prophet has a similar status, as does *Yahweh* in Judaism. *AIB Insights* operates within our professional culture, so legitimate discussion about the truth of these religious claims is to either dismiss them as having no basis, or treat them as part of the culture of our audiences that we can describe but cannot evaluate. I will take the latter stance in the present essay. Beyond what happened in any specific classroom, the community reactions illustrate that what happens in our classrooms can challenge the basic belief systems not just of individual students in class, but of cultural communities outside of class. These considerations

include the centrality of training to self-schemas and social identity, the kind of self-disclosure we encourage and the place of individual consent.

## Training Depth

Intercultural training necessarily surfaces students’ unquestioned assumptions. Training methods, including those about symbols, can target relatively superficial knowledge, somewhat deeper attitudes or very basic assumptions (Brislin, McNab, & Nayani, 2008). One concern in training is that challenging deep assumptions can generate so much discomfort in students that it spreads throughout the class and impedes learning (Du, Fan, & Feng, 2011). A second concern about deep training is with the personal and social implications of fundamental changes in our students’ sense of self and in the network of social relationships that sustain them. For example, do we have the ability and responsibility to deliberately use experiential exercises that encourage students to reject their cultural group and begin the process of replacing it with another? An even broader concern is with what happens when deep training affects cultural communities (Bhabha, 1985). Ordinarily, my own goal when doing culture-related work is to assume that my audience will retain their own social identity and learn how to better promote relationships between their own cultural group and others. Exercises in which students watch their colleagues under an instructor’s guidance dishonor basic elements of their own or another group’s culture may go deep enough that they may harm the student and my relationships with their cultural community.

## Promoting Disclosure

Disclosure has been a central topic in social identity theory since its inception in Tajfel’s work (Turner, 1996). As a Jew born in Poland and fighting for the French during WWII, Tajfel was captured and placed in a German prisoner of war (POW) camp. To his captors, he was a **French** Jewish soldier. Believing that his life would be in greater danger were he known as a **Polish** Jew, he chose not to disclose his Polish identity. For much less life-threatening reasons, people routinely manage the impressions of others by choosing what hidden identities to disclose

(Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Disclosing stigmatized identities can produce anxiety and damage relationships (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Promoting disclosure in training can be destructive in some intercultural situations (Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). Beliefs linked to religion can be sufficiently deep and potentially stigmatized that they are not casually revealed. People in work situations in the United States are often cautious about exposing their religious identity (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). In many parts of the world, the relatively open and safe (for now) context of a training class can provide a setting for revealing identities that students may later regret. Exercises that promote disclosure of identities about religion, lifestyle, ethnicity and others, especially identities that are ordinarily protected in a student's societal context, have long term risks that can affect students and their cultural groups outside the classroom.

## Consent

In my conversations about the "step on Jesus" exercise with colleagues, I found the view that students are not being forced to do anything was central to those who support its use. The instructions for the exercise make it clear that students need not comply with the exercise. Still, they are to remain in class to observe what others do. I did not encounter discussions about whether consent was needed about being present during the exercise. Most all discussions of consent rested on individualistic views of choice that includes a sharp distinction between acting and watching as well as distinctly Western views about the meaning of *adult*.

Lacking publications about informed consent for classroom exercises, the closest related literatures are about consent for human subjects research (Emanuel, Wendler, & Grady, 2000) and medical treatment (Applebaum, 2007). Both are in the context of the individualistic norms and rule-of-law orientation of the United States (Roberts, 2002). These literatures advocate providing patients and research participants with *information*, evaluating whether they are *competent* to understand it and ensuring that their participation is *voluntary* (Appelbaum, Lidz, & Klitzman, 2009). A few articles recognize that consent is shaped by participants' cultural and religious values (Roberts, 2002).

Consent occurs in a context. In the present example, this is a context of enforced legal protections, shared experiences and subgroup norms of students in the United States. US law protects various groups including religious groups as well as race, ethnic and gender groups. Many universities confirm such protection in their ethics statements. The Academy of Management's statement about ethical teaching indicates: "It is the duty of AOM members who are educators to show appropriate respect for students' feelings, interests, needs, contributions, intellectual

freedom, and rights to privacy" (Academy of Management, 2006, p. 3). US students, then, have reason to expect that professors will respect their basic religious beliefs, among other hidden identities. An informed consent process would need to ensure that students understand and feel unconstrained enough to waive these protections. The nesting of choices about university, major, courses and assignments raise a question about constraints on consent. In instructions that students do not need to take personal action to revile a particular racial, ethnic or gender group may not be sufficient, especially if the student needs to be present while others engage in that activity. Being present at such an event differs from reading or hearing about such an event (Graham, 1981).

The discussions that I encountered about informed consent to participate in class sessions that challenge students' own self-schemas and social identities and their cultural group's basic worldview were based on US views of students' personal maturity and stability. In the United States, the designation "adult" is typically used for someone once they reach age 18. Stage models of moral development, however, have long been available (Eisenberg, 2000; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) which suggest that moral reasoning changes well into a persons' 20s. Recent

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brain imaging documents the physiological brain maturation process that corresponds to psychological maturation (Tamnes et al., 2010). The legal argument that students have the right and responsibility to provide consent at age 18 may lead to different conclusions than does a maturity argument.

## Reconsidering Personal Practice and Professional Norms in Intercultural Training

A substantial constraint on the license of US professors to do research as they see fit was imposed by Title II – Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research of the National Research Act of 1974. Psychological studies that revealed the inhumane behavior of people when placed in positions of authority caught the attention of legislators and of the public to pass this legislation. The "step on Jesus" exercise has certainly generated high-level government and public attention, although not yet of the same scope as these other examples. Apart from the threat of regulation, international business faculty need to ponder how we approach teaching a culturally diverse audience.

The “step on Jesus” controversy has left me with several thoughts that I now consider when doing intercultural training. One is to be cautious about encouraging students to engage in role play or watch others engage in role play that shows dishonor toward the basic self-schemas and social identities of themselves and those people in their main identity group. The lesson that symbols are arbitrary can be recast as indicating that they have no functional implications for anything in the physical world. Training can use real and hypothetical cases to make the point rather than re-enacting threats to the transcendental meaning of sacred words or religious symbols. Another thought is to take care when using an artificially safe, but transitory, training environment to overcome reluctance to disclose hidden identities. The long-term consequences of some disclosure may be better taken on by more permanent family members, close friends and cultural community leaders. The literature about medical and research consent leaves me more confident that I can explain discriminatory behavior that has happened outside the classroom than that I can ethically recreate it in the classroom. Consent by college students appears to be less adequately studied than have topics like ethical judgment and brain development.

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