A Relational Aid to Multicultural Fields:
Cultural Metacognition

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Abstract

One reason to learn the cultural backgrounds of individuals on a multicultural field is the fact that the physical, neuronal pathways in the brain underlie cultural differences among the peoples of the world. Cultural metacognition includes unconscious,[1] in-the-moment monitoring and control of cognition, as well as conscious reflective reasoning and planning. It can enable appropriate application of cultural information and can be developed through reflection on intercultural encounters. Metacognitive experiences can become the starting point of a learning cycle centered on fieldmates. The article classifies cultural metacognition as a relational activity because it can help fieldmates see each other for who they are.

Key Words: cultural metacognition, culture, metacognition, mindful, multicultural teams

Introduction

Serving on a multicultural field is first and last a relational essay. Good relationships, like a well-written essay, have multiple drafts behind them. Jesus blended a strong emphasis on relationships with a consistent focus on what He was sent to do, so we know it is possible to combine the two. Yet in practice it can be challenging to follow His example.

Metacognition is a mental skill, useful in both the relational and task sides of ministry. A simple definition of metacognition is thinking about thinking. Examples of cognition are solving mundane addition and multiplication problems and the writing of this article. If you have ever said, "We can think about this in more than one way," you have used metacognition. If, when you finished taking a test in school, you had a sense of how well or poorly you did on it, then you experienced metacognition. If in the act of thinking or doing you realized you made a mistake, it was metacognition that gave you that sense of mistakenness.

It was only five years ago that I first learned that there was a thing called metacognition. I investigated it as a prelude to creating an intercultural seminar for those who serve on multicultural fields (MCF). As I read about metacognition, I realized I had been practicing it for a long time. Learning the labels for its components enabled me to identify when I had been experiencing and using metacognition before I became a missionary, while I served as a missionary in Uganda, Ukraine, and Russia, and while I have been serving in missions organizations in the U.S.

The title of this article includes multicultural "fields," not "teams." The metaphor field is preferable because the metaphor team is an U.S.-American metaphor, when by definition a MCF *is not* and *cannot* be an American group. Moreover, using the metaphor team privileges an American conception of the metaphor above how fieldmates from the Global South may conceive of it. Not using the metaphor team is a step towards U.S.-Americans giving up power over the way Global South intercultural servants talk and think about their fields of service. This article defines a MCF as one where at least three cultures are represented among members.

This article seeks to apply the literature on metacognition – which is focused on learning primarily though not exclusively, in formal educational settings – to learning about the cultural and social influences on MCF members. Instead of discussing how metacognition may guide the learning of a subject such as science or history, this article addresses MCF members as subjects directing their learning of fieldmates. MCF members are not objects of study but siblings in Christ, partners in intercultural ministry. As a MCF is a special kind of Christian community, the members are to manifest the presence of the Spirit through God-honoring relationships that are a witness to the world (cf. John 13:35; Col. 3:12-17).

Becoming familiar with the cultural backgrounds of fieldmates can be fostered by the practice of cultural metacognition (CM), which enables reflection "on cultural assumptions in order to prepare for, adapt to, and learn from intercultural interactions" (Chua, Morris, and Mor 2012, 2). Those who are high in CM tend to learn new cultural norms faster (Morris, Savani, and Fincher 2019, 58) Learning about fellow MCF members is a way to honor and respect their cultural backgrounds, a way to show the value of each individual as she is.

Given the number of times the word "cultural" has already appeared and will appear in this article – instead of simply presuming that readers agree that learning about the cultural backgrounds of fieldmates matters – the following subsection reports briefly on what cognitive neuroscientists have been learning about the influence of culture or the social environment on the brain. In short, culture sculpts the brain (Goh and Park 2009; Park and Huang 2010).

Culture Sculpts the Brain

The socio-cultural environment of babies and children shapes the wiring or microstructure of their brains. As Peter Hanenberg (2018) writes, "Different cultural practices lead to different structures in the brain – including size and connectivity of certain cerebral regions" (13). Barrett (2018) notes, "The human brain is a cultural artifact. We do not load culture into a virgin brain like software loading into a computer; rather, culture helps to wire the brain. Brains then become carriers of culture, helping to create and perpetuate it" (144). Although the macrostructure of the brain is indeed the same for all humans, the microstructure is different, a product of individuals' backgrounds. Given the inherent diversity of a MCF, the brain circuits of each member will be different at the micro level, making it harder to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Cultural differences among fieldmates are not merely surface-level behavioral superficialities but have corresponding neural substrates.

About 45 years ago scientists began to learn that the adult brain can extend and strengthen existing brain circuits, as well as grow new brain cells, specifically neurons, in response to a variety of influences external to an individual (Fuchs and Flügge 2014). The ability of the brain to grow new cells and create new brain circuits is called neuroplasticity. Thanks to our God-endowed neuroplasticity, no one is locked into the cultural default settings of a home culture. Individuals can consciously and deliberately modify cultural tendencies learned in a home culture. No one of any cultural background can legitimately claim, "This is how God made me and I cannot change." Part of learning about intercultural fieldmates is identifying the multiple cultural influences on each individual. Cultural metacognition can play a key role in facilitating that learning process for the purpose of improving relationships among fellow MCF members.

Cultural Knowledge

While factors such as personality are major forces influencing behavior, also significant are situational context and cultural influences. Indeed, "the power of situational context to affect behavior comes mostly from culture, because cultures give social contexts important meanings, and it is these meanings that drive behavior" (Matsumoto and Juang 2013, 28).

An incomplete list of cultural aspects that may be potentially important for understanding the communication habits of individual fieldmates follows. In actuality, "we largely decode the message [received] based primarily on nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, paralinguistic tone of voice, and bodily postures and gestures" (Ting-Toomey and Dorjee 2019, 261). It follows that a new MCF member should first and last pay close attention to the nonverbal communicative behaviors of fieldmates, for it is here that relational misunderstandings born of misinterpretation may begin. In contrast, U.S.-Americans usually focus first on verbal communication habits. These habits include preferences for high context or low context communication, a direct or indirect interaction style, a person-oriented or status-oriented style, high or low power distance, and an individual's concept of and orientation to time (Thatcher 2012, 65; Ting-Toomey and Dorjee 2019, 180-194).

Even so, possessing cultural information is not the same as having cultural knowledge. Knowledge involves the application of information (Brackett 2013; Vora 2015). A simple Internet search may supply a wealth of cultural information and not one little bit of cultural knowledge. Why? Because the social setting in a how-to video (who the specific individuals in the video are, where they are located spatially and in time, their ages, their home cultures, personal histories, etc.) is unlikely to be the same as the social settings on your MCF. Information becomes knowledge when you know how to use it appropriately in specific social contexts.

A related construct is cultural intelligence. "Specific content knowledge of cultures is the foundation of cultural intelligence because it forms the basis for comprehending and decoding the behavior of others and ourselves" (Thomas et al. 2008, 128). The behavior of individuals of other cultural backgrounds may be different from one's own in part because their assumptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior may be different. Monocultural individuals lacking cultural intelligence have a particularly strong tendency to decode or interpret the behavior of individuals of other cultures based on the learned preferences from their own cultural backgrounds. Still more problematic is those individuals' tendency to regard their interpretations to be 100% accurate. The automaticity of an interpretation may be reckoned as "proof" that one's interpretation is *right*.

Misinterpretation of what a fieldmate's communication habits mean *to him* can be the seed from which interpersonal conflict on a MCF may sprout. Assuming it is known that resolving misunderstandings and conflict involve exploring possible underlying causes, CM can suggest possibilities of what those underlying causes may be. Some form of dialog with a fieldmate would then be necessary to confirm what may be its actual cause(s). Then it may be possible to imagine a resolution to it. Similarly, when a social context changes – perhaps individuals of other cultural backgrounds join the conversation – CM can offer a reminder that one may need to alter one's manner of speaking to accommodate the cultural assumptions of those who just arrived. CM can also offer suggestions for possible matches between what is already known about the individuals and one's store of cultural information. Cultural metacognition is *the* skill

that enables appropriate application of information *to establish and maintain healthy relationships* on a MCF (Thomas et al. 2008, 131, 135).

Mindless Living

Individuals regardless of cultural background cognitively process social cues automatically (Fernandez-Duque, Baird, and Posner 2000, 289; Ginot 2017, 5; Glaser and Kihlstrom 2005, 189). As an individual moves from one social setting to another in a home culture, she automatically knows the words to say, in a certain tone of voice, with the right kind and amount of emotion, accompanied by appropriate body postures and facial expressions. This individual also has implicit expectations of how others ought to respond. The most comfortable, easiest, and least tiring action is to relate mindlessly. That is, we live much of each day on autopilot.

On a MCF the automatic, mindless action or response that was appropriate back home may be transformed into a social gaffe that may be mildly to very offensive to fieldmates of other cultural backgrounds (Thomas et al. 2008, 125). The solution is to turn off autopilot and live your life mindfully until appropriate ways of relating and communicating on a MCF become automatic (Thomas et al. 2008, 132). Cultural metacognition can help identify actions that build and support better relationships among fieldmates.

Hasty Value Judgments and the Bible

As recorded in John 7:14-24, Jesus was teaching in the temple courts during the Feast of Tabernacles. Opinions about Him were divided, some saying He was a good man and others saying He deceived people (v. 13). Jesus concluded His defense first by asking a question (v. 23) and then by making a statement, "Stop judging by appearances, and make a right judgment" (NIV, v. 24). The New Living Translation puts His statement positively: "Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly." What a fieldmate says or does may strike you the wrong way. It may require some investigation to find out if you understood accurately what she intended to communicate.

The Book of Deuteronomy lays down standards for the investigation of crimes. When an accusation was made against an individual, a judge was supposed "to inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly" (Deut. 13:14). Also, a lone witness was "not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deut. 19:15). Acting on the basis of your own value judgment of a fieldmate as valid, based only on a superficial understanding of her, would be hasty.

John 9 records the story of a man born blind whom Jesus healed. The Pharisees investigated the incident, talking to the formerly blind man twice (vv. 13-34). Yet they did not care what the facts of the matter were, that the man who could see really had been healed by Jesus. The Pharisees lacked spiritual perception, and that lack was willful (vv. 40-41).

The Pharisees were not willing to follow wherever the evidence might lead because to do so would overturn certain of their basic beliefs. They were so deeply invested in what they knew *must* be true they refused to accept what was real. Similarly, trusting your gut reaction to what a fieldmate said or did even in the face of evidence that your gut got it wrong would not be praiseworthy. Jesus wants us "to look carefully and to see things for what they really are or what they truly signify" (e.g. Mark 8:17-18) (Collicutt 2015, 34).

The Wisdom Literature calls us to seek wisdom for everyday living that is a result of observation and reflection (Prov. 24:30; Eccl. 4:1; 8:9). A pair of proverbs invite one to reflect on when to answer a fool and when to remain silent (Prov. 26:4-5). Regarding God's wisdom, the author of a commentary on the Book of James writes that "because of the identification of wisdom with God's Spirit, the claims to be wise, to have God's wisdom, and to be filled with the Spirit were virtually identical" (Davids 1982, 152). Reflecting on wisdom as characterized in James 3:13-18 and connecting that reflection to mindless living may reveal relational habits that need to be modified.

Living and serving mindlessly on a MCF will likely lead to hasty, premature, and inaccurate value judgments of fieldmates. A caring and wise fieldmate will check information for accuracy, take time to observe, and reflect in order to see past superficialities. Metacognitive skill can aid spiritual perception of fieldmates.

Mindfulness

A difficulty of discussing mindfulness is that there is no agreement on what it means, with some emphasizing its source in Buddhism and a few expanding its meaning to implicitly include metacognition. In this article, a minimalist stance is taken, describing it as "paying attention on purpose," choosing to be consciously aware in the present moment (Van der Horst and Albertyn 2018, 5).

Paying attention to what? To one's inner world of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, including taking note of *metacognitive experiences* (see the ensuing section) as they occur. A mindful MCF member also pays attention to the immediate social and physical setting in which she finds herself, observing the nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors of the individuals in her immediate vicinity (Thomas et al. 2008, 131). Such attention is mindfulness and cultural metacognition for the sake of God-honoring relationships on a MCF.

To be mindful is a conscious choice and a conscious activity. Sustaining mindfulness over longer stretches of time can be physically and emotionally draining.

Cultural Metacognition

Staying aware moment-by-moment makes it more likely that an intercultural missionary will notice unexpected or unusual things said and done by fellow MCF members. Such novel situations are times when you cannot or should not engage in routine actions and are instances when cultural metacognition (CM) can help you improvise in the moment. In short, the practice of CM can help you cope better in just about every encounter and situation when you first join a MCF (Fernandez-Duque, Baird, and Posner 2000, 289). Coping well of course makes you feel better. Coping well aided by CM is also socially beneficial for a whole MCF.

If you pay attention to the emotions you are experiencing in novel situations you may note a feeling of surprise and/or confusion. It is likely one or both of them are metacognitive experiences (ME) (Veenman 2001, 213). Here is one illustration of how ME occur:

> Imagine that you come from a culture that values direct, straightforward communication….. Now imagine that the individual with whom you are communicating comes from a culture that values indirect communication and the avoidance of public embarrassment…. Now, consider that neither of you is sufficiently knowledgeable to

adapt your communication style to suit the other's culture. The most likely result of this scenario is that you will ask a direct question and get what you perceive as an unsatisfactory result. At this point you are likely to experience an emotional reaction – discomfort, perplexity, offense, or surprise (Nardon and Steers 2008, 51).

What this illustration calls an emotional reaction is in fact a ME. A ME is a message from the nonconscious mind formulated as an emotion that something needs to be investigated. There is information about your conversation partner which when understood, reflected on, and used appropriately may facilitate better understanding and communication that can contribute to better relationships (Efklides 2006, 5).

When I first read the article by Efklides in March 2015, I realized I had been having and paying attention to MEs for decades. Having a label for what I had been experiencing brought into focus what was happening in my mind. It also boosted my confidence in my metacognitive judgments or decisions that grew out of MEs. A ME does not tell me what I am missing in an encounter, only that missing something I am. The two feelings I usually get as a ME are either surprise or unease.

In August 2014 (one year earlier), I returned to Uganda for the first time in 21 years, having lived and served there for eight years. During those years I lead the founding of a Bible College for training pastors. As we drove to the college an African in the car talked on the phone with the college's African director. He asked about our estimated arrival time and what our dinner plans were for the evening. We also learned there would be a program attended by many at the college the next day, after which we would all have a late lunch together.

I knew from years of personal experience that hospitality was highly valued among Bakonjo, the people I served and served with. So then, there was no question they would provide dinner for us. Yet the African director, with whom I served side by side for years, asked about our dinner plans? His question did not make sense, and I felt vaguely uneasy. I was having a ME. Then in astonishment I exclaimed "Samweli (not his real name) is asking us *not* to have dinner at the Bible College tonight!" Immediately the Africans in the car had whole body reactions just as I had mine a moment before. When we called Samweli back to offer to eat dinner in a restaurant instead of at the Bible College, he offered the culturally unusual explanation of wanting to spare the women cooks of having to fix dinner for us while still have to make lunch the following day for a very large group. (It is also worth noting that this incident illustrates that choosing well relationally is also good for ministry.)

CM includes in-the-moment monitoring of cognition and error checking of it (Morris, Savani, and Fincher 2019, 48). While at the time I did not yet have the CM label, my cultural metacognitive monitoring detected what might be a cognitive error, or at least an anomalous question. I then became consciously aware of how I felt, which was a ME. Next bloomed in my conscious mind the thought that Samweli was asking us not to eat at the college that evening. What happened in between my ME and my realization of what Samweli was really asking?

CM also includes nonconscious control of cognition (Efklides 2006, 11; Veenman 2013, 201). As I was having a ME, my cultural metacognitive ability *on its own initiative* directed my nonconscious thinking, searching my cultural knowledge for an explanation of Samweli's incongruous question. The same ability offered a likely explanation for his strange question, of which I then became consciously aware (Kudesia 2019, 412). This nonconscious control of

cognition can offer behavioral solutions to new or unusual events as they unfold (Efklides 2006, 11; Klafehn, Li, and Chiu 2013, 967). A new MCF member should expect to experience many new and disorienting intercultural encounters that leave one mystified about how to behave or respond. CM can help identify how to behave appropriately so that one's behavior fosters better relationships with MCF members instead of hindering them.

Note that my cultural metacognitive ability could not have identified Samweli's bizarre question as an instance of indirect speech if I had not possessed that piece of cultural knowledge. Cultural information is as foundational to the operation of CM as it is to cultural intelligence. Goryunova (2020) relates outstanding case studies of CM in action.

In addition to in-the-moment nonconscious monitoring and control of nonconscious thinking, CM also includes conscious reflective reasoning and planning (Morris, Savani, and Fincher 2019, 48, 63).

A ME can become a starting point for an experiential learning cycle (ELC). An ELC has four parts: Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As a learning *cycle*, active experimentation proceeds back to concrete experience (Kolb 2020; Nardon and Steers 2008, 50-52; Ng, Van Dyne, and Ang 2009m 512-513; Van der Horst and Albertyn 2018). Using the ELC is a helpful approach to learning contextually-relevant cultural information as needed about fieldmates on a MCF. CM can initiate and guide an ELC centered on fieldmates for relationship-building purposes on a MCF.

Developing Cultural Metacognition

The following description fits one of my former ministry colleagues: "there are … adults, who are overconfident in their response although they are totally ignorant of a topic. This overestimation of their knowledge or of their abilities suggests a lack of metacognitive awareness of their deficits in knowledge" (Efklides 2006, 11). My former colleague may have been either naturally low in metacognition (Fleming 2014, 34; Veenman 2001, 210; Wokke, Cleermans, and Ridderinkhof 2017, 787) or had not tuned or calibrated her MEs (Efklides 2006, 11). Perhaps as a young person she implicitly concluded that her metacognitive sense was unreliable and stopped listening to it.

How to help an individual who has little or no sense of how little cultural information she knows? *Somehow, that person's unconscious mind needs to be informed of what it does not know* (Serra and Metcalfe 2009, 20). Such a process occurs indirectly by the individual making a list of the categories of cultural information known poorly or not at all. As noted earlier, a person's metacognitive sense is always monitoring or "listening in" on his conscious thinking.

Conscious reflection on past intercultural interactions, all the while looking for lessons to apply to future encounters on a MCF, is the beginning point for developing CM (Chua, Morris, and Mor 2012, 25). This constructive process applies both to individuals whose metacognition works well in others spheres of life and to those whose metacognition is underdeveloped. Gibbs's six-part Reflective Cycle offers plenty of detailed guidance for reflection (The University of Edinburgh 2019).

The individual who is either naturally low in metacognition and/or never learned to tune her metacognitive sense is the most difficult to help. Merely becoming more aware of what is felt during an intercultural encounter is a first step. An excellent article on metacognitive experiences

points out that they are "highly variable. As a consequence, the information they convey … may go unnoticed or, even, be misinterpreted. This implies that one has to 'learn' the meaning of a ME and understand the conditions that give rise to them" (Efklides 2006, 11). The process of learning what a ME means or indicates is called tuning. A mistaken interpretation of a ME can be a learning moment when the reason why it was mistaken is identified.

Concluding Comments

Seeking to relate to other MCF members according to one's own familiar social forms of interaction is likely to produce misunderstandings and hurt feelings, if not damaged relationships. CM provides mental skills that can be employed to help fieldmates see each other as they really are for the purpose of relating according to Biblical love and wisdom.

Previously I referred to a former ministry colleague who seemed unaware of the limits of her knowledge. During my years of service with her, what I remember most strongly in meeting after meeting was a sense of the holes in *my* knowledge. As a proposal was explained and discussed, what came through to me was what I did not know. These realizations were metacognition at work in me in the moment, monitoring my thinking, identifying the limits of what I knew, and occasionally suggesting strategies to find out what we all needed to know. Although my comments were well-intentioned, I eventually realized they were not welcome. I was overly focused on the task at hand and too little focused on people.

Service on a MCF is an incredibly complex undertaking, particularly in terms of interpersonal relationships in tandem with ministry tasks. The importance of paying attention first to nonverbal communication habits was noted earlier. What I learned about nonverbals and could use in practice while living and serving in other cultures I learned intuitively through mimicry. That was fine as far as it went, but my learning in that area did not go nearly far enough. I needed to have consciously reflected on what I did not know, then consciously decided how to acquire the needed information in order to teach my unconscious mind about nonverbals, so that my metacognitive sense could have helped me in this area.

A common source of interpersonal problems on a MCF is the misinterpretation of each other's nonverbal communication. As an intercultural missionary, your metacognitive sense cannot help you unless you learn to pay attention when it speaks or until you teach it what it needs to know. The practice of CM can enhance interpersonal relationships and Kingdom ministry on a MCF.

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[1] Some readers may be puzzled by the reference to "unconscious" instead of "subconscious" monitoring and control of cognition. As a term, the meaning of "subconscious" is often unclear. Freud condemned the use of the term. Psychology uniformly refers to the "unconscious." The sentence in the article refers to cultural metacognition as part of the unconscious mind, which works in tandem with the conscious mind.