

Interculturalists as Dragon-Riders

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Abstract

This paper discusses three lines of research undertaken independently over the last two to three decades by H. Ned Seelye and Jacqueline Wasilewski, by Stephen and Sybil Wolin and David Matsumoto. Seelye and Wasilewski's work is based on the textual analysis of life histories (autobiographies, autobiographical novels, oral histories and interviews). The Wolin's work is based on clinical data from youth at risk, and Matsumoto's work is based on survey data. These lines of research have not only employed both qualitative and quantitative methods but also a variety of theoretical perspectives (theories of coping and adaptation from social psychology, theories about the etiology of resilience from clinical psychology and theories on emotions from cross-cultural psychology). All point to the ability to manage negative emotion (the "dragon" of the title) as the "gatekeeper" of intercultural effectiveness. Negative emotion is intrinsic to the intercultural experience and can manifest itself as anxiety due to having our basic assumptions called in question, as the frustration that accompanies having to learn new things quickly in order to function, and/or as outright rage at being oppressed. But in any case, it has to be managed in order to access the often hard won treasures of intercultural experience. These three lines of research have identified three conceptual schemata, each of which has been graphically represented in this chapter: an Amoeba of Multicultural Coping & Adaptation, a Mandala of Resilience and a Gatekeeper of Personal Growth. In addition, these lines of research provide some clues as to the transformational dynamics that enable interculturalists, metaphorically, to ride this "dragon," that is, to manage negative emotion effectively. This dragon can be managed by the transformational elements at the heart of the Amoeba and the Mandala. In the case of the Amoeba the transformational element for coping and adaptation is the ability to deal with bitterness. In the case of the Mandala the transformational elements for resilience are humor and creativity. The deep meanings of humor and creativity, the ability through humor to turn a "something" into a "nothing" and the ability through creativity to turn a "nothing" into a "something," are able to inform our understanding of the nature of the alchemical act of "Riding the Dragon of Negative Emotion," of being able to transform negative psychological energy into positive energy, so that even the bitterness and rage that are the result of oppression can be dealt with in life-enhancing ways.