

ONE WORLD... OR MANY?

by Dennis White, Ph.D.

In discussing the purpose and many benefits of international exchange programs, one of the most commonly heard assumptions is that when people from different cultures live together, they can eventually cut through the barriers of language and custom to find that, all over the world, people are basically alike. This has been dubbed by some to be the “One World” theory - the idea that language and other cultural differences are relatively superficial, and that basically people are the same.

This widespread belief is one of the motivating factors for many of the thousands of people, around the world, who dedicate countless hours of time to promoting and organizing a wide variety of exchange programs. It is also a belief that seems to be largely validated by the experiences of those people who see how much understanding and brotherhood are enhanced, at a person-to-person level, by these programs. The close and lasting relationships that are developed in exchange programs are legendary. There is probably not a person with experience in exchange programs that does not have stories of students, host families or parents returning for weddings or other events, years after the initial exchange.

While the “One World” theory may be a positive motivator, there are some fundamental obstacles in it that make approaching intercultural relation from another point of view worth considering. In fact, it may be that some of the problems in international exchange programs come from an over emphasis on the “One World” theory. For example, most people are relatively familiar with the concept of culture shock - the physical, emotional and intellectual disorientation that often accompanies immersion in a totally new cultural environment. While most exchange students are trained to expect and cope with this phenomenon and eventually get through it, many do not. They experience what might be termed a chronic culture shock. Although there may be complex reasons for this, and each case is unique, this never-ending shock may be in part due to being stuck in the “One World” approach.

After adjusting to superficial differences, and after finding some common ground, some exchange students become frustrated by differences that appear to be at a very fundamental level. They are confronted with the new reality that, at a very basic level, different cultures may view the world differently in how they think, what they value and how they view relationships, among other things. When confronted with these differences, they may react by rejecting the host culture. This may be as “mild” as never really liking it but sticking it out, or as severe as returning early. As a part of this rejection they may either think that there is something wrong with them or wrong with the host culture, when, in fact, it is not a question of right or wrong, good or bad, but just different.

Another problem that can come from this unexpected confrontation of fundamental differences is when exchange students over-adapt to the host culture, rejecting their own culture as bad and adopting the new as good. This is sometimes referred to as “going native.” While this may appear to be a positive adjustment, it is often only when it is time to return home that problems appear. While they may physically return home, psychologically they feel homeless. Does this mean that the “One World” theory is bad and must be abandoned? Not necessarily. In fact, it is

almost always the initial point of view of exchange students when they first get involved in exchange programs. Instead, it may be more helpful to look at the “One World” theory as an important developmental stage, but not the final stage, in intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Instead of beginning with the basic assumption of similarities, it may be helpful to take the approach of cultural anthropologists and experts in intercultural communication who, instead, make a basic assumption of differences. This means, for example, that people differ not only in language, but that they differ in how they answer such basic questions as the character of human nature, the relationship of humans to nature, the importance of time in human activity, the purpose of human activity and the nature of human relationships. While all cultures address these questions, they don’t all answer them the same way.

As people grow up in their own cultures, they view the way they do things as right, natural, and possibly the only way to respond. This is the basis of what is called ethnocentrism - the tendency to view one’s own culture as the right, natural and only way. When one encounters another culture that is different, one then unconsciously judges that culture by one’s own cultural frame of reference. The very first encounter with the culturally different almost always provokes an extreme ethnocentric response of defensiveness toward people of the other culture, by criticizing or feeling superior to them.

After repeated exposure to another culture and the development of some cultural awareness, some people move on to a position where they can no longer deny the existence of differences between cultures, but neither can they accept the fundamental nature of those differences. This then becomes a stage of minimization of those differences, essentially recognizing they are there but are not as important as the basic underlying similarities between people. The “One World” theory is an example of this. The similarities are sometimes viewed in terms of physical needs (such as, we all have to eat, procreate and die) or in universal transcendent terms (such as we are all God’s children, or all people want and need to realize their individual potential). While people in this stage are able to recognize and accept cultural differences, they are uncomfortable with emphasizing those differences and resolve them by minimizing their significance. But the resolution is still basically ethnocentric, in a more subtle way.

For example, an American exchange student preparing to go abroad might be advised, “When in doubt, just be yourself and you’ll do okay” (because people are people, and if you act “natural” others will respond in kind). This is subtle ethnocentrism in that it assumes that one’s natural self will be automatically understandable to others, and further, that the natural self will be valued and appreciated in another culture. In fact, being “natural” on the part of an American may be seen as being rude and disrespectful in another culture. When similarities are seen, they are also more commonly seen as “They are just like us”. Seldom does one hear the phrase, “We are just like them”. People in this “minimizing of differences” stage of cultural awareness are certainly interested in other cultures. And many are able to participate effectively in most aspects of exchange programs. It is just that their tendency to resolve differences in this fashion is still ethnocentric, and thus, limits their potential for further understanding. The limiting factor is their own cultural frame of reference.

There are further potential stages of cultural sensitivity, and they almost always come only after extended immersion in another culture, along with the development of substantial cultural competence. As a result there is a major shift from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Ethnorelativism is conceptually different in that it assumes that cultures can only be understood

relative to themselves. There is no natural, right standard that can be applied to all cultures. This assumes that one's own culture is no more central to reality than any other, regardless of one's own preferences.

The move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, is usually difficult, both intellectually and emotionally. If no one culture is inherently right or wrong, but just different, many people mistakenly conclude that they must necessarily approve of all aspects of all cultures. Although there is no necessity of ethically agreeing with all cultures in this stage, many people believe that is what they must do. As a result, they are often overwhelmed by this apparent dilemma, and either move on to a more developed stage of sensitivity, or fall back to some form of ethnocentrism.

On the other hand, moving to ethnorelative thinking can be liberating and exciting. One learns to expect and look for differences, knowing that understanding those differences will help give the new culture meaning and help make sense of it. Instead of judging another cultural practice as bad, because it is different, one looks for differences in behavior and values and tries to understand why they occur from the point of view of that culture. For example, Americans tend to pride themselves on punctuality, especially in matters of business. In trying to make a business appointment in another culture, an American might find that his or her business counterpart arrives late, keeps them waiting, and then allows all sorts of interruptions, other business and social events to interfere. An ethnocentric interpretation might be that the other person isn't very businesslike, is rude, disrespectful and disorganized. An ethnorelative view might be to try to understand why those behaviors and values are present, and what they mean. It assumes that the above behavior is normal for that culture and that the person is behaving exactly as he or she should. In that culture, it may be that time is very past or future oriented, not present oriented. It may be that business and social life are constantly mixed, not separated. It may be that no disrespect whatsoever has been shown, and the other person may be behaving quite ethically, within the values of that culture.

Acceptance of these differences and trying to understand them leads to the ability to learn to adapt to them, when operating in that culture. Adaptation then becomes another developmental stage in ethnorelativism. It is more than the adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," because such behavior comes with an understanding of why it is important. As one might expect, this stage takes a considerable degree of cultural competence and the time in which to develop it. Many exchange students are just getting comfortable with this stage when their exchange year ends.

The final stage of ethnorelative awareness is an open-ended one. It usually doesn't come until an exchange student returns to his or her own native culture for a while. It is a stage of true integration of a multicultural point of view. The person is essentially at home and competent in at least two cultures, often ones with radically different points of view on many basic aspects of life. Paradoxically, the person is also not really at home in either culture. This is the comment of countless students, even years after their return. Because they can now see their own culture from another point of view, and because they have lived life from that point of view, they can never be exactly as they were before. On the other hand, no matter how well they adapted to the host culture, they know that is not completely "them" either. Without some help in understanding this process, these returned exchange students can spend a long time only experiencing the negative side of this cultural "no man's land".

In time, and with some help interpreting their experiences, they can come to see that they now view their own culture more clearly, often appreciating it much more, while also being more critical of it. They develop a sharper concept of who they are and what they stand for. At the same time, they understand and appreciate at least one other culture that is different from theirs, and different at some fundamental levels. They have learned to appreciate those different behaviors and values as being just as right and valid for that culture as theirs are for their own culture.

People with a true multi-cultural or at least bi-cultural orientation, who have integrated those awarenesses, think not in terms of one world, but instead, of many worlds. But they are not so concerned that these differences exist. They not only tolerate differences, they appreciate them. They become part of an ongoing process of moving in and out of their own cultural context. Since they are not bound by their native cultural frame of reference at all times any more, they are able to shift, appropriately, among points of view.

When we send exchange students around the world and tell them it will be the experience of a lifetime, we are speaking the truth. By learning to be culturally competent and by developing a high level of cultural sensitivity, we are helping them change so much that they will never really be the same. They can learn that people are basically alike in many ways, as in the “one world” theory. But they can also learn to function in, and think of the world, as many very fundamentally different cultures. They can learn to understand and value the “many worlds” of our planet.