Seven Lessons
In Intercultural Communmications

We learn from experience that not everything which is incredible is untrue.
Cardinal de Retz

There's every chance you'll emerge from any intercultural awareness exercise or other experience a bit rattled, humbled, and perhaps even taken aback by the workings and power of culture. And a good thing that is, too, for the central message here, after all, is that in dealing with people unlike us we can't afford to be too sure of ourselves. This general truth can be subdivided into several lesser ones, pieces of practical advice to keep in mind when communicating across cultures. We offer these seven lessons as a kind of summing up of the notion that is at the heart of this book and is likewise the key to successful intercultural communication.

Lesson One

Nevertheless, when you go abroad or meet people from abroad, try to entertain the notion that they might be very different from you. If it turns out they aren't, all the better; and if it turns out they are, score one for your side.

Lesson Two

What you think of as normal or human behavior may only be cultural. A lot of behavior is universal, of course, and doesn't differ from country to country But not all. Before you project your norms onto the human race, consider that you might be wrong.

Lesson Three

Familiar behaviors may have different meanings. The same behavior-saying yes, for example-can exist in different cultures and not mean the same thing. just because you've *recognized* a given behavior, don't assume you have therefore *understood* it.

Lesson Four

Don't assume that what you meant is what was understood. You can be sure of what you mean when you say something, but you can't be sure how this is understood by someone else. Check for signs that the other person did or did not understand you.

Lesson Five

Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant. You are obliged to hear what others say through the medium of your own experience. You know what those words normally mean, but whose norms are we following here: yours or the foreigner's? If they're the foreigner's, do you know what they are?

Lesson Six

You don't have to like or accept "different" behavior, but you should try to understand where it comes from. You may never get used to some of the things foreigners do (even as they are occasionally put off by you), but it can't hurt to try to figure out why they behave in such irritating

ways. Once you realize, for example, that the reason Hispanics use go-betweens is because they don't want to hurt your feelings, you may be able to make your peace with that behavior. Or at least you may not react so strongly to it. In other cases, even when you know the cultural explanation for a certain behavior, you may still not like it. Fine. But what have you lost by trying to understand?

Lesson Seven

Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover the rationale. Foreigners aren't acting this way just to get your goat. This is really how they are. They come by their crazy norms the same way you come by yours: through the process of cultural conditioning. You may not think much of a particular bit of irritating behavior, but can you really say it isn't legitimate?

This, then, is our story: even though we know better, we all look around us and see not other people, but ourselves. And while we accept, intellectually, that others-especially foreigners can't possibly be like us, we behave for all the world as if they were. Oddly enough, our experience of the world doesn't always change our understanding of it; that is, our deeply felt notion of how things must be often prevails over our experience of how things are.

In time, however, through simulations, discussions and reflection we can begin to change our view of ourselves and the world and come to believe that they are not one and the same. Once we have done that, we will truly be citizens of the world.

Adapted from ***Figuring Foreigners Out*** by Craig Storti.

The Rotary Youth Exchange Experience:

Culture Shock

By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Most of us are familiar with the term "culture shock". We may think of it as the temporary disorientation that comes from being exposed to a different language, different customs, food, etc. What we don't often realize is that it is usually a rather profound reaction to fairly significant other differences; in the way people view the world, in the way they think and what they value. Tourists often experience culture shock at a superficial level. People who actually live in another culture can experience culture shock as an on-going reaction and adaptation to basic differences. Rotary Youth Exchange Students, living and studying in a different culture, living in the homes of host families, often experience significant culture shock, sometimes on a continuous basis, throughout their stay abroad.

Most exchange students in year-long programs go through a fairly identifiable progression of adjustment to culture shock, although each student's experience is unique. It must be emphasized that while culture shock can be very uncomfortable, there is nothing wrong with it, or with the person experiencing it. It is also quite common for students to have a very positive and rewarding experience, despite having on-going adjustment problems with culture shock. Many would argue that the most rewarding exchanges come only when there is a pronounced experience of culture shock.

Culture shock usually involves at least four stages. It is quite common for these stages to repeat themselves as students become more and more successfully immersed in the host culture. These stages are:

1. Excitement and Enthusiasm. This is the feeling of excitement and enthusiasm that accompanies travel to a new place, seeing and doing so many new and different things, and meeting new people. It is most prominent at the beginning of the exchange year, but can repeat itself as students continue to have new experiences, like changing host families, meeting new students, or continued travel. Sometimes it can be the excitement that comes from developing a new skill or increased understanding of the host culture.

2. Irritability. This is the stage most readily associated with culture shock and occurs when the initial excitement wears off and real differences become evident. These are differences that go beyond food and language, and they are often indescribable to the person experiencing them. No matter how understanding and accepting the student may try to be, there will be many time when they just don't like or understand why their host culture is the way it is, and they can't seem to make the feeling go away. Irritability can come at any time that a student is confronted with differences they may not have experienced or perceived previously.

3. Adaptation. This is the longest, most difficult and most rewarding stage. This is when students learn to accept that they will have to adapt if they are going to be successful in their host culture. They work at adapting to customs and habits that they may not understand, and may not like. Sometimes even when they try very hard, they have difficulty, because so much of this adaptation depends on learning the native language. They know they are adjusting when they begin to think and speak using idiomatic expressions (expressions that have meaning beyond a literal translation). They know they are adjusting when they notice

that they are doing things without thinking, and these are the very things they never thought they could become comfortable with. An example would be when someone from a very formal culture becomes comfortable standing very close to other people, frequently touching them and being touched, during a conversation. Adaptation is a continuous process, and it requires added attention as some of these newly discovered differences become apparent to the student.

4. Biculturalism. This stage comes very near the end of the stay, or sometimes doesn't really emerge until the students returns to their native countries. This is when they realize that they have become competent in another culture, and can see the world and function from another, very different point of view. When this stage emerges toward the end of the exchange year, it all seems very unfair to the student. Just as they are getting to experience the benefits of really knowing how to function well in their host culture, they have to go back home.

In **Table 1** below, a model of a typical year of adaptation and adjustment to culture shock is pictured. The bold line that waves up and down represents the high and low feelings that students experience as they go through the various stages of adjustment to culture shock.

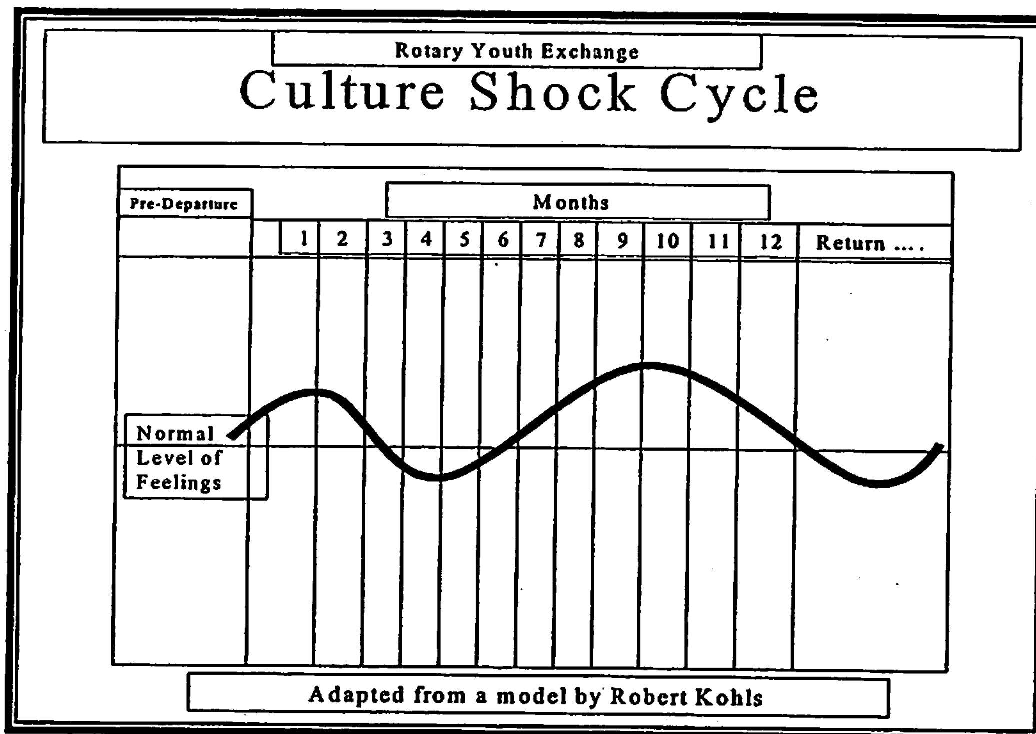

Table 1.

The first few months, including the period just before departure, coincide with the initial excitement stage. This peaks when the excitement wears off, or what is sometimes referred to as the time when the "honeymoon" is over. This is when reality sets in. This is when differences beyond superficial ones emerge, and irritability sets in, often verily quickly. At times, however, this irritability can come fairly slowly, but it is almost inevitable as the confrontation of one's own ethnocentrism occurs.

The lowest point typically comes at about four months, or near the middle of December, for students who start their exchange in August. For Christian students, this also coincides with what is probably the first Christmas they have spent away from their families. As a result, there is a sort of double negative of culture shock and homesickness.

Following the irritability stage is the much longer stage of gradual adjustment and adaptation where the student really learns the cultural tools necessary to function competently in the host country. This stage can actually involve the recycling of prior stages, with deeper and deeper understanding following periods of confusion, frustration and irritation.

The final stage, shown as coming around the time of returning home, can involve another plunge into a period of feeling low. If the student is not already sad at the prospect of returning home, "just when it's getting good", they will almost inevitably feel sad shortly after they return, when they go through a "reverse culture shock". This phenomenon is less well understood, and less often anticipated, but just as common as initial culture shock. The degree to which students go through reverse culture shock is a rough measure of the success of their immersion in the host culture, and not a sign that something is wrong. Only after experiencing reverse culture shock can students really appreciate the extent to which they have changed, and, as a result, the extent to which they have become truly bicultural.

The journey through culture shock has also been described as moving from **Ethnocentrism** to **Ethnorelativism**. All cultures are ethnocentric. They teach their members that their way is the right, natural and preferred way of doing things. When someone is exposed to another culture, with different values, behaviors and beliefs, there is a tendency to respond with defensiveness, labeling one's own practices as right and the other culture as wrong, silly or even stupid. Ethnorelativism is the awareness that develops as one realizes there are other valid ways of dealing with the world – whether we agree with them or not. When the exchange student gets through the initial denial (which is what happens in the irritability stage) they can begin to develop the skills necessary to adapt and be competent in the new culture. They then develop an ethnorelative world view. Their thinking may follow this progression:

1. I don't like the way they do this – it's stupid.
2. But they seem to be doing o.k. doing it this way.
3. If I want to survive here, I'd better learn to do it this way.
4. Now that I can do it this way, it doesn't seem so bad, even though I may still prefer to do it my way.

Developing the competence to succeed in another culture – that is – going through the process of culture shock, may be better understood by analyzing the process of developing competence at anything. Essentially, we go through four stages:

1. Unconscious Incompetence. This is a stage when we not only don't know how to do something, we don't even know that we don't know how to do it. We are ignorant. Most of us think we know the proper way to greet someone. For example, when we go to another culture where greetings are done quite differently, we may just breeze along doing it our way, not even knowing that what we are doing may be perceived as rude or insulting.
2. Conscious Incompetence. In this stage we may be aware that we are doing something wrong, but we just may not have the skills yet to do it properly. We may know that

another culture spends more time in greetings inquiring about one's relatives, but if we are not skilled at the language, we may have trouble doing it, even if we want to.

3. Conscious Competence. In this stage we have developed the necessary skills to do what is necessary, but we still have to consciously remind ourselves to do it. We may think it is a waste of time to stop and discuss the well-being of all of our family members when we greet a friend, but we know how to, and more importantly, we know it is important to do so in this culture in order to appear "civilized" and polite.
4. Unconscious Competence. In this stage we have become so skilled at the new cultural behavior that we do it without thinking. We may find that it becomes very natural to stop and chat with friends as we greet them, inquiring about the mutual health of both families, as if it is the most natural thing in the world to do.

When exchange students get to this point – unconscious competence, they have gotten to the bicultural stage of adjustment to culture shock. They have developed an effective ethnorelative world view. So one can seek that culture shock is not a problem to avoid. Instead, it is a necessary discomfort that one must go through to really experience the rich and varied joys of intercultural living.

(note: Additional articles by Dr. White on related topics include "The Middle Stage of Culture Shock" and "So You Think You're Home Now". Both may be obtained by contacting Dr. White.)

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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.