

# Research in Review

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## Cultural Understanding in a World Community

THERE is a common assumption that getting to know people of another country will lead to liking them. However, recent research on cross-cultural education, especially studies of foreign students (11), suggests that this expectation is oversimplified and overly optimistic.

Many factors are associated with differences and attitudes of foreign students. They bring a set of preconceptions and expectations as well as a variety of motivations to the host country. Differences in national background seem to comprise a major source of differences in perception. The relations between countries also influence perceptions!

Let us ask ourselves, then, if we are oversimplifying the task of teaching cultural understanding to American children and youth.

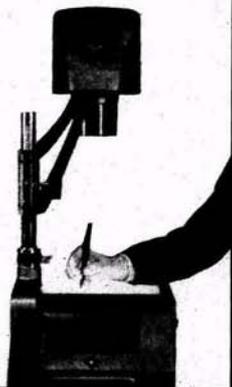
In spite of the fact that we Americans are products of the mingling of many cultures, we are strongly ethnocentric. Can people who view the rest of the world out of the complacency of their own cultural outlook accept the idea that there are many cultural solutions to the basic needs of man that may be very satisfactory to the people of those cultures? What preconceptions do American children bring to the study of other cultures?

Most Americans have vague and biased ideas of what makes the peoples

of other nations what they are. If we add to these limited notions the anxieties and fears that accumulate with rapid technological changes and dislocations, and with threats of nuclear war, there is greater danger of misunderstandings than ever before.

A search for research in education on the problems of teaching for international understanding—and especially for cultural understanding—reveals very little concern for these problems. It appears that we are in a stage that parallels the romantic “good will” phase of our early efforts in intercultural and intergroup education when children were dressed up in the costumes of their ancestors, for example, in a simple effort to promote appreciation of ethnic contributions to American life (21).

Many school systems are concerned to improve their programs for international understanding. Their efforts, on the whole, take the forms of such enterprises as Pen Pals, U. N. Days, new units on India, Japan, and Africa (the entire continent in six-week to three-month units!). Some schools have ambitious attempts to incorporate new and recent information into social studies curricula. Most of these schools, however, operate on such assumptions as these: (a) person-to-person contacts (Pen Pals, foreign visitors, etc.) make a difference; (b) better information in the form of



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recent, up-to-date films, books, pictures, will change perceptions and attitudes; and (c) taking on the roles of other nations in U. N. Days will help us to better understand and communicate with those nations. So far, few of these projects include plans to research these assumptions, other than using such simple evaluation devices as asking teachers for their opinions as to the worth of the new materials or programs.

It is clear to this writer that we are at present simply "rearranging the curriculum," to quote Earl Kelley, rather than formulating theories and hypotheses to be rigorously tested out that will help us to develop significant programs for cultural and international understanding.

There is a large and growing body of research in the social sciences on prejudice, intergroup tensions, stereotyping, interpersonal perceptions, personality development, cross-cultural perceptions, and cognition. Such research can provide us with a basis for developing hypotheses for necessary conditions and educational programs which may further cultural understanding. A sampling of some of the studies in prejudice and stereotyping may be fruitful.

Bogardus, some time ago (4), and Katz and Braly, more recently (12), and others have demonstrated in investigations of racial prejudice the uniformity of the patterns of discrimination against various races, religions, and national groupings shown by Americans throughout the United States. Katz and Braly conclude that racial prejudice is a generalized set of stereotypes of a high degree of consistency. Stendler (17) has shown that from primary years on, young children are increasingly discriminating in their differentiation of social class differences.

Trager and Yarrow (20), in their study of prejudice in young children, found that kindergarten and primary grade children are aware of racial and religious differences (much more so than adults have thought) and that they learn undemocratic behavior from the surrounding environment.

Else Frenkel-Brunswik (9) reported an exploration of patterns of social, motivational and cognitive factors in children that contribute to ethnocentricity in children as contrasted to those that develop the liberal child. After describing some of the contributing conditions in child-rearing, she concluded that "Deliberately planned democratic participation in school and family, individualized approach to the child, and the right proportion of permissiveness and guidance, may be instrumental in bringing about the attitude necessary for a genuine identification with society and thus for international understanding."

Certainly, such evidence suggests that children will also bring prejudice and stereotyped thinking to the studies of people of other cultures.

### Role of Information

There is conflicting evidence on the role that information plays in changing perceptions and attitudes.

Robert H. Bohlke (3) reports a study of attitude changes in college students as a result of a study of India. He concludes that no direct relationship is demonstrated between increased information about a people and a decrease of prejudice, suspicion, etc., on the part of the student.

Bjerstedt (2) reports the results of five children's international summer villages conducted in Scandinavia for children approximately 11 years old, aimed

at overcoming national barriers and national stereotypes. Through individual interviews, photo-sorting experiments, observations of informal contacts and attitude and personality tests, the study explored the hypothesis that informational determinants (especially direct information gained from face-to-face interaction) play an important part in the process of establishing nationality images. There were clear tendencies in these children toward less over-preference for the subject's own nationality and own language groups at the end of the camp period. One American girl said, "I have changed my ideas about other peoples. I thought I would dislike them. I find them to be different in customs, but all-the-same the same kind of people." Bjerstedt concludes that there is no need to be wholly pessimistic about this kind of socioeducational attempt. Informational determinants (in this case, direct contacts) do play a decisive role in the formation and reformation of our international orientation. This conclusion stimulates the question, "Under what conditions, and in what forms, does information make a difference?"

Trager and Yarrow in the study cited previously (20) concluded that contacts (in their cases, between Negro and white children) need to be accompanied by other change techniques to prevent some prejudiced persons from regarding the contact merely as an exception to previously formulated generalizations.

Bjerstedt reports a second set of two studies with university students. He found that students who hold more negative national stereotypes tended to favor more negative personal descriptions of national groups on the basis of conflicting data and insufficient data, and tended to be more easily influenced by experimenters. He also found that stu-

dents low in "international co-responsibility" tend toward oversimplified and negatively biased reactions, and tend to defer to the opinions of leaders more easily. In other words, individuals with more stereotypes tended to show greater susceptibility to social influences.

Other studies (15, 16, 1) have consistently demonstrated that a person's perceptions and memory of materials shown to him are often distorted by his wishes, motives and attitudes. People selectively discount the information they are exposed to in the light of their prior attitudes. Furthermore, people change their views, after exposure to information, *differentially*, each in the light of his own prior attitude.

George Coelho (6) concludes, in a study of students abroad, that "... cross-cultural educational experience should be of a kind that diminishes the probability of certain syndromes developing in individual personality, such as dogmatism and authoritarianism, diffuse resentments and pervasive distrust, social alienation and withdrawal. Cross-cultural education should be of a kind that would increase the probability of broadening the basis of an individual's self-esteem, reality-testing, self-knowledge and range of compassionate concern for others."

Such conclusions need to be related to our present national push in the pursuit of excellence. Bronfenbrenner (5), in a study of the American child, observes that children coming from achievement-oriented families excel in planfulness and performance, but they are also more aggressive, tense, domineering and cruel. He speculates that education for excellence may entail some sobering social costs!

It is obvious that the same concerns

that have occupied researchers in intergroup education and personality development must apply to cultural understanding at the international level. It would be fruitless to plan curricular projects, no matter how rich in information, that did not build on a systematic program for the reduction of prejudice and stereotyping and the development of democratic personality structures.

The social anthropologists provide us with further support in this area, as well as with theories and empirical evidence on how culture shapes our definitions of what is real and valuable.

Cora Dubois, in commenting on learning intercultural understanding (7), emphasizes that cross-cultural systems must be related to an expanding system of self-relatedness in the child, that we must supply the emotional learning resources essential to intuitive learning, as well as cognitive-rational materials necessary for systematic knowledge.

Anthropology provides us with the concept of "culture" (13, 14) and various anthropologists have delineated for us the cultural determinants of human behavior. We are gradually learning to look at cultures as systematic and integrated wholes (14). However, it will require new teacher education experiences and new approaches to culture study before teachers can achieve an anthropological outlook on culture and a cross-cultural approach. The realization that just more information about people (in American categorical terms of food, clothing, shelter, etc.) will not suffice, is difficult for us to acquire.

Some school systems are seeking help in achieving this orientation. The Palo Alto Unified School District, Palo Alto, California (10), has launched a three-year study, using consulting anthropolo-

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gists and other social scientists, to prepare teachers for cross-cultural teaching. One group will be given systematic information, another group will be given information plus planned living experiences in another culture. A rather elaborate research design has been developed for testing out alternative theories of teacher-education for cross-cultural understanding.

The ASCD Commission on International Understanding has sponsored the development of an anthropological theoretical framework for culture study, prepared by Theodore Parsons of San Francisco State College. The Commission hopes that this will provide the basis for developing new approaches to key experiences and materials within the anthropological framework.

In this crucial time in world affairs, we cannot afford to take a superficial approach to cross-cultural study. Our children need curricula that help them to understand what it means to live in culture, their own and others. They need experiences and teacher guidance that will help them to develop the healthy personality structure which will enable them to relate to others, at home and abroad.

This need emphasizes that education for cultural understanding in a world community is a necessary extension of education in interpersonal and intergroup relations in our national community. The work of Trager and Yarrow (20) and of Taba and her associates in the Intergroup Commission studies (18) not only provide us with research models, but also with productive programs and tools. If we now add the growing body of content and procedures from anthropology, we can really provide opportunities for education in cultural understanding for a world community.

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## What Kind of Man?

THIS may appear to be a peculiar title for a research contribution. Frankly, the present paper is written from the point of view that it is impossible to work intelligently in the field of curriculum amid program claims and counterclaims without clarifying values in regard to the kind of man who may emerge from his first two decades of life in family and school.

Recently a committee of the Utah Legislative Council reported<sup>1</sup> that 23 percent of the boys and 16 percent of the girls who entered tenth grade did not stay to graduate. Two factors of particular interest were listed by the young people as influential in their decision to quit: first, they wanted more individual attention and consideration; second, 28 percent said that they did not get along with school officials. Although many of these students may acquire the technical training they need for vocational purposes, will they find the sense of belonging to a larger group that results in concern for others? Will they secure the aid necessary to resolve their conflicts with authority?

Another local study, conducted by Paul Willis, pertains to the reading ability of a district's population of a thou-

<sup>1</sup> *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 20, 1961, under the by-line of Jerome K. Full, staff writer.

sand seventh graders.<sup>2</sup> The salient data concern students who read (on standardized tests) a grade and a half above the expected norm. These able readers were again divided into two groups. The members of the one group were nominated by their teachers and peers as students who did a great deal of reading. Other instruments of identification were interviews with students and parents, a schedule filled out by parents and students, and public library records. The students who read widely for their own purposes did not differ in measured intelligence or in grade point average from the students who did not use reading in a personal manner. But what different *people!* Members of one group exercised more initiative, were involved in relating themselves to wider experience through their use of books, contributed more to the class group, and read with significantly greater power than their classmates who were equally capable and were seen by their teachers as equally competent, at least as measured by assigned grades.

Reading ability appears to be one thing and personal behavior in the use of books as an integral part of one's way

<sup>2</sup> Paul Willis. "Factors Differentiating Students Who Read Extensively for Personal Use from Those of Equal Ability Who Do Not Read." Unpublished Doctor's dissertation, The University of Utah, June 1962.

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