

Understanding American Worldview

Part I

J. LAVELLE INGRAM, PHD

Over time, I have taught many courses on cross-cultural differences, and I always complete an exercise within them. I explain the different options for worldviews, and then I ask my students to identify "mainstream American worldviews." The students have only heard of the classic systems for explaining worldviews within that class, a few minutes before I ask them the question, and yet they always get it right. How?

What my students don't realize, and often immigrants don't realize, is that worldviews are pervasive in one's society or culture. They aren't necessarily spoken of because there is no need to speak of them. Everybody already knows them because they guide most of the society. My students have lived with the American worldviews for all of their lives, so when they hear the system, they know the answers. But the average immigrant is operating on a different set of worldviews, and the two do not always make sense in cross cultural interactions.

It is important, then, for the new immigrant to understand the system into which s/he is entering so that navigating that system can become more sensible. American worldviews have been identified by many sociologists and anthropologists as follows: Our time sense is futuristic; our sense of nature involves mastery; our sense of human nature is that it is basically good or mixed; our social sense is individualistic; and our sense of the proper way of being is to value doing. These values mean that: 1) Time focuses on the future rather than the past; it needs to be planned for; youth is more valuable than age. 2) We should be able to control nature; it is here for our use and we are separate from it. 3) Given human nature, you can count on people to do the right thing given the chance; at least it is not inherently bad and in need of strict control. 4) The individual's wishes, needs and aspirations are more important than the group's (including the family's), and it is appropriate for an individual to move away from and function independently of the group. 5) What one does, accomplishes, is

more important than the way s/he conducts her/himself. Thus one's job is important in determining one's relative value in the society.

Now, the above list may seem odd to those coming from other cultures. Folks may wonder, "Why these ideas?" or "Why these values?" At this point, though, it is more important to understand how the worldviews operate rather than why Americans might choose these, because these worldviews not only identify the foundation for basic decision-making, they also identify what a culture considers good and right and proper. Operating differently, then, can lead to confusion about the immigrants' choices, not to mention suspicion and/or devaluing. Learning to operate between the different worldviews, or at least how to make your own translate, will only serve to increase your effectiveness with American audiences.

In the next article, I will continue to articulate the implications of the American worldviews. In the meantime, consider the other alternatives identified by social scientists and see if you recognize your own: Time sense can also be present or past oriented, (focus on history, ancestors, slow change). Our relationship to nature can be seen as harmonious or we can be seen as subject to it (in harmony we are one part of the whole, in subjugation we must be resigned to our physical and spiritual fate). Human nature can also be viewed as mixed or bad (needing more monitoring and control lest we get out of control). Social sense can also be group focused or function within a strict hierarchy (such that the needs of the family must come first and/or one must keep one's place in order to be a proper person). Finally, the proper way of living can focus on both being and doing or simply on being (in these cases how one conducts oneself is more important than what one achieves).

In each case, the worldview identifies the values of the society as a whole not necessarily the individual. So the question is not about your personal belief, but about what

most folks in your culture would say, or more to the point what they should say. Understanding American worldview

can help you understand why many folks behave the way they do versus how folks behave where you come from.

Part II

From the last article, you may recall that American worldviews mean that: 1) time focuses on the future rather than the past; 2) that we should be able to control nature; 3) that people can be counted on to do the right thing given the chance; 4) that an individual's wishes, needs and aspirations should be counted as more important than the groups' or families'; and 5) that what one does or accomplishes is more important than the way s/he conducts her/himself.

Regarding time, a future orientation suggests that the present must take second place to the needs of the future and that it is inappropriate to focus on the past. So, in America it is deemed proper to save for retirement, to make a schedule for next week and to plan on one's children's education years before they go to college. Of course, some people do spend their money on the big car now (present oriented), but they are considered unwise by American standards. Folks living-for-the-moment do live in America (especially among the young), but all in all it is viewed as somewhat inappropriate. However, the last option, living according to the past, makes little sense to most of mainstream America. If an immigrant family decides, for instance, to spend substantial money on a monument to an ancestor rather than save for a child's education, most Americans would frown upon that decision. It is valuing the past more than the future. If an American family, on the other hand, passes on a visit to their elders in Italy so that they can buy a bigger house, they would be considered wise (by other Americans). The focus on being busy is another artifact of America's future time sense, as is the notion that "time is money."

So what is an immigrant to do? Coming to America does not automatically mean that people want to adopt American worldviews and values. Yet, living according to different worldviews comes with consequences. In general, it has proved effective to my clients to tell the American the worldview that is primary for you. So, let's say your family buys the monument to the ancestor (past time oriented), and the American coworker asks, "Why did you all do that? You could have put that money in your kid's college fund." Then the immigrant might say, "We believe it is important to honor elders first. It is a serious obligation." The American counters with, "Isn't it your obligation to pay for your child first?" So the immigrant can then clarify, "No. We want our children to learn to honor elders first too. So that is the value we modeled for them." Here, no one is submitting

to the other's way of thinking, the immigrant is just making her/his way of thinking make sense. Thus, if the American person ends with, "I would have paid for my kid's college first," the immigrant is clear that this decision reflects a worldview difference. S/he can then say to the American coworker, "That makes sense within your culture, as my decision makes sense within mine."

Social relations is another area that seems to impact immigrants a lot if they come from group or lineal oriented cultures. In America, since the social relations sense is individual—a college kid decides his own major, a young woman moves into her own apartment, a young man gets a job and does not give money to the family. In many other cultures these behaviors would be considered, at least disrespectful if not outrageous. The difference is how we view the individual's proper role; in America that role focuses on providing for oneself and learning to function independent of one's family. So, should a young woman move to another state for a great job? In America, the answer is yes. Should an older man take on his father's obligations after he dies? In America, the answer would be no. And these folks are not being heartless or selfish; they are simply taking care of themselves, as is their first obligation (and sign that their parents prepared them well) within American worldview.

Still, each immigrant comes with her/his own culture and worldviews. How then do you explain these to your American coworkers, friends and neighbors? First, realize that you don't have to if you don't want to. Then realize that there is much to be gained if you choose to make the effort. Once, an Indian mother said to me, "You Americans, you don't help your children on the most important thing." I asked her what she meant, and she said, "You send them out into the world to find love with no help at all. You just say, 'Good luck. I hope you find someone.'" She was the first immigrant to help me to understand the rationale behind arranged marriages. From an American point of view, that decision comes from the individuals involved, yet from many other cultures it is the parents' solemn responsibility (lineal worldview). That mother's effort to help me understand increased my effectiveness as I addressed other couples facing arranged marriages. Because of her, I do not assume that such matches are improper or pointless. Because of her, I recognize the value of doing things the other way. So, if you take on the challenge, most Americans can benefit from similar efforts.

Part III

The preceding articles included just a few examples of the wide variety of decisions that can arise from different worldviews. Sometimes they can be comical, but other times they can mean life and death. For instance, consider the notion that human beings should master nature. This point of view has led to such medical advancements as antibiotics and effective surgeries. This worldview suggests that we should be able to defeat diseases, and an American family would likely choose whatever invasive procedures necessary to cure a family member of a disease. But would an immigrant to America make the same decision? Maybe not. Some immigrants might feel that the disease reflects some imbalance in living (harmony worldview), and thus decide that changing her/his way of life would be more effective. Another immigrant, coming from a subjugation point of view, might decide that the disease is his/her destiny, and that it only makes sense to give in to it with dignity. Most Americans would have trouble understanding such a decision. The important thing for the immigrant is to realize that s/he is living within a mastery culture, and that is the point of view s/he will have to manage.

Human nature is another important aspect of the five identified dimensions of worldview. As stated previously, in America, human nature is thought to be good or mixed. Thus, in this country, personal freedom is a core value; it suggests that the society as a whole will work better if you count on the individuals to live up to their best selves. It is a notably optimistic view of human beings and suggests that the fewer constraints imposed on people the better. However, in many other cultures human nature is viewed fairly pessimistically, and it is considered, at core, bad. In this case, people need rigid controls in order to stay on the right path; they need to be monitored closely so that they do not have the chance to give in to their negative impulses.

Finally, worldview addresses the appropriate "way of being." In America, the preferred worldview is that "doing" is most sensible since it leads to achievement. In this country, one of the first questions acquaintances will ask is "what do you do?" What one spends time doing is of primary importance in deciding one's status. Further, if you mention a vacation, Americans will ask, "Where did you go? But also "What did you do?" We will expect to hear about your activities, even while you were on vacation. If an immigrant reports that "I went back home to look after my parents," the Americans will likely give a polite "Oh," but they will not really understand. Even a

statement that "I spent some time with my grandparents," will likely confuse the average American. These activities reflect a being-in-becoming or being point of view wherein how one conducts oneself is more important than what one achieves.

Once again, we come to the question of what an immigrant person is to do with these differences. These three articles on worldview were written primarily for the purpose of lending understanding of differences that can be quite confusing. While most Americans do not know this model of describing cultural worldviews, they do live within these noted American worldviews, and will likely recognize them if they are discussed. Thus, person-to-person conflicts, or simple misunderstandings, can be explained by immigrant people using this model. There are advantages and disadvantages to every way of thinking, and being able to discuss the advantages of your different worldviews might go a long way to bridging the gaps in discourse. Yes, Americans believe in mastery over nature, but we are also having to realize that the overuse of antibiotics is creating super-germs. We are coming to recognize that recycling (harmony worldview) is a beneficial, and perhaps, necessary societal activity. We may believe in a good human nature, but recent incidents of terrorist killings have given us reason to reconsider. Those nations that closely monitor their citizens (human nature bad) are appearing much more sensible to Americans in light of these events. And the crooks at Enron, who achieved great wealth, but failed to be good custodians of their workforce, make us review our emphasis on doing over being. Cultures wherein the leaders of such companies encounter serious loss of face in the society (being worldview) suddenly make more sense to us.

In short, the immigrant does not have to decide to adopt American worldviews to live in America (assimilation); nor does one have to hold rigidly to the culture of origin (rejection). Rather, it is simply a more effective living strategy to recognize the cultural differences and consciously negotiate them. In this manner conflicts that may erroneously be considered personal dislike may be more accurately identified as simple differences in worldview. Decisions that are confusing or even unthinkable or absurd may be rendered sensible with the articulation of these different worldviews. And the task of engaging peculiar cultural others in one's personal or professional life can be rendered interesting social challenges rather than confounding moral dilemmas.