

Bridging a CULTURAL CHASM

Is Western psychology relevant to non-Western people?

If not, what alternatives might there be?

How important is ethnocultural diversity to the survival of the human race?

Professor Anthony Marsella has travelled and worked in 44 countries in an attempt to find some answers.

By HELEN BASILI.

Anthony Marsella was 26 years old when he went to work with the Iban tribe in the jungles of Borneo. It was 1968 and he had just completed a Ph.D in Clinical Psychology at Pennsylvania State University. Marsella's brief was to conduct a psychiatric epidemiology study of the Iban. He spent weeks trekking through the jungle, a lone white man with an Iban translator, going from village to village in an attempt to understand the thinking of a group of people vastly different from himself.

"It was at that point that I truly got what 'culture' meant. I mean I really did, when Iban people I were talking with pointed out that who they were was the dirt, the earth, the wind, the trees and the water. That was a transformative moment to simply understand there are alternative constructions of reality," says Marsella.

Marsella was eventually forced to leave Borneo, after becoming

desperately ill with an intestinal disorder. But he was not eager to go back to a staid existence in the United States. His life thereafter, has been an odyssey of work and travel. He is a Visiting Professor at six universities, mostly in Asia, has travelled to 44 countries, learnt to speak five languages, written 10 books and published over 130 book chapters, journal articles and technical reports.

A commitment to the study of ethnocultural aspects of psychology and to the promotion of ethnocultural diversity has been the driving force for Marsella: "I think it is one of those causes that is *so* right, that it is easy to be passionate about them," he says. As the son of Sicilian immigrants to the United States, he is well attuned to the complexities of cultural diversity.

"The real beauty of diversity, is that each culture gives us a window on the world. What it does is offer us a choice. If we say that freedom is the number of choices you have

available, if you have many cultures by which you can look at a phenomena, then you have many more choices to understand it."

Marsella believes that the best way to understand another culture is to learn about the history of those people, to participate in their celebrations and struggles and, if possible, to learn their language. Poetry and literature are particularly insightful, he says. Marsella recalls his own experience of immersing himself in Japanese culture. He read numerous technical journals and published articles himself, but never truly came to understand the culture until he began reading Japanese poetry and literature.

However, he is keen to stress that the best we can probably do is to "approximate" an understanding of another culture: "I don't know in the end if it is possible to totally know, not only another culture, but also just another person. Each of us are, to such

a strong extent, unique and distinct," says Marsella.

Marsella cautions against the assumption that Western psychology is universally applicable. "Western psychology is, after all, rooted in Western culture," he says. When Western psychology is blindly applied to non-Western peoples, the result can be disastrous. Marsella describes the process in one of his articles as "a colonisation of the mind."

"How much better, if we are compelled to use [Western psychology], to use it in hand with an indigenous psychology or an alternative non-Western psychology of the people being studied. Wouldn't you understand far more if you could understand the people from their own psychology?" he asks.

Marsella is a strong advocate for the development of indigenous psychologies. He recommends that Western psychologists help indigenous and non-Western peoples to articulate and formalise their psychologies so that they may be codified in a written form. Then, it will be much more difficult to dismiss the psychologies of these cultures.

A culturally diverse area like south western Sydney, where 52% of the residents were born overseas in 133 different countries, can make a great contribution to Australian society, says Marsella. "We have the opportunity to build the traditional cultures of all of these people but what we must do is provide them with opportunity, provide them with a sense that they are welcome, respected and that we are glad they are here. [To do otherwise] will ultimately lead to tremendous levels of stress for everyone.

"Today, many ethnocultural minority groups are involved in gang subcultures...but these have emerged as alternative economies because they are denied opportunities. We can have tremendous amounts of diversity and

it will work, but we *must have* equal opportunity," he says.

Marsella believes that politicians must face the realities of the modern world. Rather than resorting to past values and traditions, they must accept that the world population will grow to eight billion in a few decades and that five out of every six of these people will be non-Europeans. They should also look honestly at existing world conflicts, which create a steady flow of refugees to countries like Australia:

"These forces didn't just begin five years ago, they began centuries ago. What we are dealing with now is not just uprisings occurring in [foreign] lands. We are seeing reactions against colonialism that started in the 15th century and to try and pretend that it is going to stop and go away is ridiculous. It is better to acknowledge it, to understand it and say 'where do we stand?'"

The world will become increasingly multicultural and it is futile to resist this process, says Marsella. If we accept and accommodate these changes, we could have a thriving civilization. Our collective wisdom could be profoundly enriched if we were to nurture cultural diversity rather than diminish it.

Australia's treatment of the newly arrived East Timorese refugees will be a test of our ability to accommodate change. Good intentions are not enough, says Marsella. We must make an effort to truly understand the East Timorese, what they can offer us and what we can offer them:



"I think [the challenge] is to empower [the East Timorese] so they are not made to feel that they are welfare wards of the state. Rather, that this is an opportunity for them to acquire new skills: language skills, exposure to different cultures, work opportunities, so that they can be better than what they were in some respects," says Marsella.

Maybe the East Timorese will fare better than the Iban, the tribe in Borneo who Marsella worked with all those years ago. Their land has since been pillaged by logging companies and the Iban who survived have been dispersed into cities and towns where they live in poverty. Marsella acknowledges that the fate of the Iban is similar to that of countless indigenous peoples and yet he still remains a self-described idealist. He has not given up on humankind and believes that we have the capacity to make the *right* choices; the choices which will create a just and peaceful world. ■

Anthony Marsella visited Australia in September to facilitate a workshop on Culture, Psychopathology, Psychotherapy and Service Delivery. He is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii.