

## Beyond-AFS ICL news: Interview with Andrea Sebben

*Andrea Sebben is a cross-cultural psychologist, author, owner of an intercultural consulting firm and member of AFS's Educational Advisory Council. Sebben, who is based in Porto Alegre, Brazil, regularly trains and consults on intercultural exchange for business people, students, exchange organizations and major athletic teams. This month she spoke to Lisa Cohen, Senior International Consultant at AFS International about the intercultural field, her new book and AFS.*



### How did you get involved in the intercultural field?

I began getting interested in the intercultural field when I had my own personal experience in Spain, studying psychology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. As my adaptation was somewhat painful I started to wonder why the psychology field was not studying the adaptation process. Why were some foreigners adjusting so well while others, like me, suffered so much? That's how I first became interested in Intercultural Psychology. I worked with refugees in the Receiving Center for Refugees & Exiles (el Centro de Acogida a Refugiados y Exiliados), a UN organization for refugees, receiving people from Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone, among others. It was a very important experience that turned into a passion.

### If relevant, what academic field was your entry into intercultural studies? How do you see this link?

The science I was getting help from was Intercultural Psychology, which provides very intelligent answers about migration issues, migration personalities, the acculturation process and similar issues. Even though it was a new area of study, it supplied important and clarifying answers for us. It was really good luck. In this line of thought I developed my first study, *Is Becoming a Citizen of the World the Result of a Migration Experience?*, which I presented at the XXIII Applied Psychology Congress (Congreso de Psicología Aplicada) in the summer of

1994 in Madrid. It was a fantastic experience because I discovered that there was a group of theorists called "Cultural Psychologists." It included John Berry, Harry Triandis, David Sam, Ype Poortinga, Geert Hofstede, among others, and I presented my paper in the same session as they did.

### Which aspect of intercultural learning or communication has your work focused on?

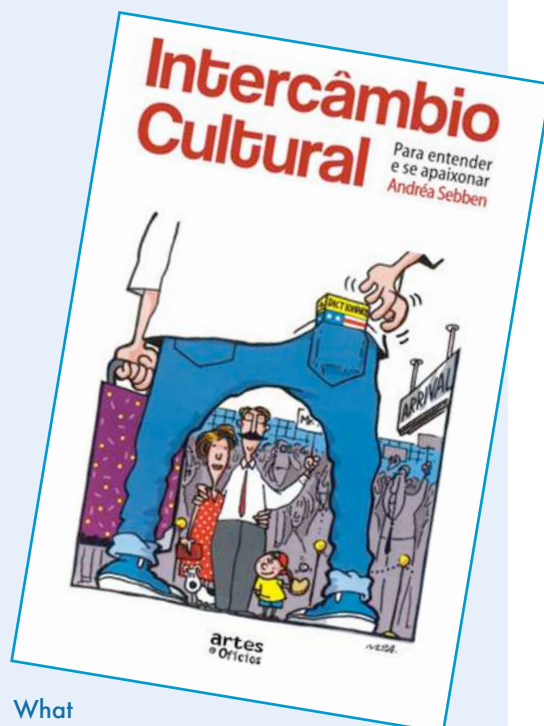
Today I use two sciences: Intercultural Psychology which helps us understand migration phenomena as a whole. Within the field this ranges from the migration personality and trends of an individual, to the influence of adaptive variables in the psychological well-being to the ethnocentric and social components of intergroup relations. Those are the interpersonal and intergroup variables that are so different but deeply useful to understanding migration. Second, Intercultural Education teaches us new ways of interaction through games of simulation and a set of pedagogical theories focused on the intercultural field.

### What do you wish more people would understand about intercultural work?

People tend to believe that Intercultural Training is merely informative and will just explain about the host country (geography, history, etiquette, gastronomy, etc.) and that's all. This is very sad and incomplete because we work from the behavioral point of view and not from the informational one. When people move, they tend to think about changes in the language, school, jobs and so on but often forget that the big change takes place inside the person that is moving. And that is our central point: to get out of the ethnocentric and prejudiced perspective towards something bigger, where the cultural differences can be seen not as a problem but as an unlimited resource.

### What would you suggest for people new to the ICL field to read as they get started?

My books!!! (laughs...) I believe I was really lucky when I started my career. People are used to starting with theory in the university and then going for the practice but with me things happened the other way around: I got out from the middle of the storm (my exchange program) searching for acceptable theories that could explain it. My suggestion is that people seek theories more and more and they should not be afraid to create their own concepts and ideas. We need more scientists and specialists in our area.



### What are the hot topics in ICL these days?

The intercultural field is all over the place nowadays and that makes me very happy. Within Intercultural Psychology we are working in the fields of cognitive and social development, linguistic acquisition, child development, psychopathology, organizational

processes, gender differences (meaning in groups with different sexual options), minority group interventions (and that includes indigenous people, Gypsies, refugees) and, obviously migration issues. Each day we realize that the intercultural field is an interdisciplinary matter and has no boundaries. The conflicts between the left and right brain hemispheres, as announced by neuroscience, can also be understood as an intercultural phenomenon. The fast access that the Chinese have to both hemispheres illustrates their difference compared to Western thought, that is more Cartesian. This is neuroscience but intercultural studies as well.

#### How has the ICL field changed since you entered it?

First: other sciences began to deal with intercultural issues, sometimes just to be fashionable, sometimes for no good reason. Nowadays, every person I talk to, regardless of his or her field, always has something interesting to say related to our subject. For instance, when I talk to football players, expatriation interests them. It is also very interesting to talk to a lawyer about the way foreign clients

make their decisions. "How do they decide, Andrea?" they ask me. If I talk to a friend who works in a multinational company, she will be interested in understanding why her boss in Switzerland behaves the way he does.

Second: due to this interdisciplinary nature, other professionals develop new methods and theories. From one point of view, that can be good, because we need it. But on the other hand, people with no formal education feel able to "do intercultural studies" using only their empirical knowledge or a second language or the fact that they lived abroad for some years. For me this is very dangerous because we need to have scientific criteria to talk about this subject in the very same way that it is required to talk about any other topic professionally.

#### What steps do you recommend AFS take to continue to distinguish itself as a secondary school exchange provider in the ICL arena?

For me AFS has three things that I consider fundamental to be a reference

in the subject:

1. You are pioneers in it and you have started from the experience and the need for change. That produces a fantastic legitimacy in what we do.
2. You have a passion for the subject and Intercultural Education is all about love towards the other, with the need of going beyond, broadening our view - and with this affection there is no task in intercultural studies that cannot be accomplished.
3. And finally you have a group of volunteers that add experience, passion and the will to go forward.

That's why, as a scientist in the subject, I believe we have a very productive partnership because we have all we need: background due to our extensive tradition, love in all we do, science and professionals to help us. Isn't that just wonderful?

Attached please find a PDF of this article translated into French by Yves Martineau, AFS Canada, as well as a version in Spanish.



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Questions or  
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[hristo.banov@afs.org](mailto:hristo.banov@afs.org)

