

CULTURAL DIVERSITY BETWEEN CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND CULTURAL SHOCK

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Abstract: *The feeling of profound disorientation experienced by an individual when encountering a foreign culture is designated in the specialized literature as culture shock. It represents a traumatizing experience described by explorers and missionaries who arrived in places where completely unfamiliar languages were spoken and where customs and traditions were strange. But the acceptance into a new culture largely depends on the immigrant's willingness and ability to communicate with members of the culture in accordance with their cultural norms and conventions. Acceptance is accelerated when the immigrant makes an effort to learn the local language and communicate regularly with the local people thus becomes familiar with their beliefs and cultural values.*

Keywords: culture shock, cross-cultural adjustment, interaction, host-culture

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural adjustment is linked to psychological wellbeing and enables a person to function efficiently in a new society. Communicating with members of the new society gives opportunities for learning about the culture and accelerates the adjustment process. However the severe stress experienced by people who are suddenly plunged into a new and unfamiliar culture has been extensively studied and documented. Common triggers for culture shock include challenging employment and living conditions and the absence of family and friends [1]. Typical symptoms include psychological disorders such as sleeplessness and irritability, relationship difficulties with local people and longing to return home. The great majority of newcomers shake off the symptoms and gradually adjust to the culture. As a result of their struggles, new learning and growth occurs.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight and bring into discussion current and relevant scientific benchmarks regarding the way to adapt to a foreign culture as well the effects of cultural shock on the individual. Also this paper explores the cross-cultural adaptation theory and the connection between adjustment and trust, respectively adjustment and personality.

2. Adjustment to a Foreign Culture

Kim (2001) defines cross-cultural adaptation as “the entire dynamic process through which individuals, upon moving to new, unfamiliar, or altered cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” [2].

Overall adjustment to a foreign culture depends largely on a person's ability to communicate with members of the culture in accordance with their cultural

conventions. For permanent immigrants this can bring problems as many people are unwilling to accept and communicate with those who are culturally dissimilar. That helps to explain why in countries such as the United States and the UK immigrants have a much higher than average risk of suffering from mental illness [4].

For people entering a foreign culture for the first time the experience can be uncomfortable, but it also gives them the opportunity to develop professionally and emotionally. They learn about their own culture's strengths and weaknesses, and gain insights that free them from assumptions of superiority which can cripple communication with members of other cultures. Individual traits that aid newcomers in adapting across cultures include effective communication skills, the capacity to build connections with members of the host culture, an open-minded attitude toward new cultures, and the ability to withstand social and cultural isolation. Research evidence suggests that the extent and pace of a person's cross-cultural adjustment to a foreign culture is influenced by various factors including language skills, family situation and personality factors.

2.1. Culture Shock

Expatriate staff, international project personnel, exchange students and others who move to a new culture often experience stress, nervous fatigue and other unpleasant responses which are associated with culture shock. Culture shock has been defined as an occupational disease of people who are suddenly transplanted overseas [5]. It is usually experienced a few weeks after arrival in the country concerned. In countries where newcomers face significant cultural barriers, achieving adjustment typically takes a longer time. Culture shock commonly arises from unsettling cultural practices, challenging work conditions, and the lack of family and friends.

Stahl and Caliguri (2005) found that managers working in developing countries

often feel intense stress and frustration when performance standards and efficiency levels are much lower than those at home. A French manager working in a Middle Eastern country told a training seminar how business would grind to a halt on Fridays: "all the men go out for Friday prayers. I'm the only man left in the office. Sometimes a lady walks in with a pile of invoices but I just have to tell her that we can't talk, and please can she come back tomorrow" [6].

Tahir and Ismail (2007) report complaints made by an expatriate manager in Malaysia: "the way we work in Europe is different. We have to work with precise objectives and targets. The pressure is very high in Europe. But people here are not used to this type of pressure and its not very easy to handle... I can't put pressure on them all the time" [7].

Work adjustment for such managers may depend on them changing their job expectations and adjusting any critical attitudes they hold towards local staff. Expatriate managers are often accountable to two bosses. They must follow instructions of top management in the host organization, but they may also have to follow instructions from the parent company at home. The result is role-conflict which creates stress and contributes to culture shock. A Western adviser to a government agency in a former Soviet-bloc country was made responsible for arranging management training for senior government officials: "the government wanted the training to take place in Western Europe. But the adviser's employer - an international aid agency - wanted the training to be held in-country because of the big cost-savings" [8]. The adviser was left wondering how he should handle the situation - before eventually deciding that the customer is always right.

2.2. Overcoming Culture Shock

Overcoming the effects of culture shock is a part of the adjustment process. Huang, Chi and Lawler (2005) argue that people whose overseas assignments last for at least 12

months should have adequate time to overcome the effects of culture shock and adjust to living and working in the new country [9]. Thus the psychological distress that accompanies culture shock is increasingly seen not as pathological but as a normative response that improves with time.

An Israeli study examined the psychological adjustment of over 380 new immigrants from the former Soviet Union during their first two years in Israel (Markovitzky and Samid, 2008). The study found that the immigrants adjusted to Israeli society in distinct stages. The first stage was loss of initial euphoria which occurred from the first days up to five months. The second stage was low well-being (the culture-shock phase) which occurred between five and eleven months. This stage was characterized by such symptoms as disappointment, frustration, homesickness, sleeping difficulties and over irritability. The third stage, recovery and adjustment, occurred after more than 11 months [10].

3. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Black et al.'s (1991) widely accepted model of cross-cultural adjustment is based on three interrelated dimensions: work adjustment, interaction adjustment and general living adjustment [11]. The popularity of the model is based on the realization that people do not adjust to different aspects of adjustment at the same time. Foreign workers, for instance, often adjust quickly to their new work environment but take much longer to achieve a general living adjustment.

Kim's (1988) cross-cultural adaptation theory provides strong support for the interaction-based model of adjustment. Kim argues that when people first arrive in a new culture they struggle to cope with the experience. But as a result of their struggles, new learning and growth occurs (acculturation), characterized by cognitive, affective and behavioural changes which,

together, facilitate communication with local people and promote positive attitudes towards the host culture [12].

The theory of cross-cultural adaptation is grounded on the premise that humans possess an innate inclination to adjust and assimilate to their surroundings. They navigate their social milieu through communication, and the process of adaptation is multifaceted, where alterations in one aspect can trigger changes in others. For example, enhanced proficiency in the local language often leads to a deeper comprehension of local cultural norms and practices.

Cross-cultural adaptation theory incorporates elements of systems theory. According to systems theory [13], every organization is an open system that exists in multiple environments. Changes in any of these environments will produce stresses and strains in the individual or group, forcing new learning and adaptation.

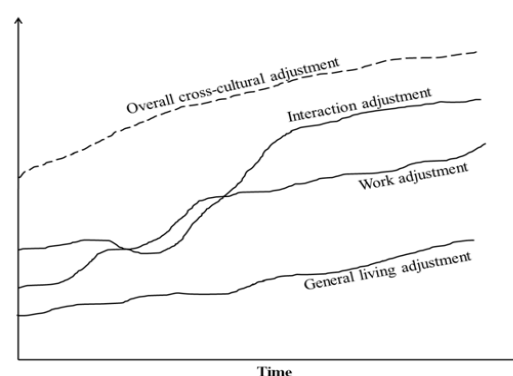


Figure 1: Aspects of cross-cultural adjustment

The three-dimensional model of adjustment – based on the three interrelated dimensions of work, interaction and general living adjustment – has become the most widely accepted model of adjustment. People do not adjust to the different aspects of adjustment at the same time or in the same way.

3.1. Adjustment and Trust

Mutual trust facilitates adjustment by influencing levels of disclosure and openness during cross cultural interactions.

Trust is essential for successful cross-cultural relationships. It provides the basis for understanding the other person's behaviour and for wishing to continue the relationship. The amount of trust that people bring to cross-cultural interactions depends partly on their country of origin. Researchers have found great differences across nations in the capacity to trust others. One study of trust across 41 countries found that only 5 per cent of Peruvians trusted others compared with 61 per cent of Norwegians and not much less in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. In Britain 44 per cent of respondents trusted others and only 36 per cent in the United States [14].

According to Fukuyama (1995), the ability to trust others is linked to economic prosperity. In rich countries there is trust because deterrents to fraud and malpractice exist in the form of financial services authorities, compliance officers and contract enforcement. In societies where strangers can trust each other people can trade without formal contracts [15]. One result is that high-trust societies achieve faster growth rates due to lower transaction costs. Distrust of foreigners, however, is a characteristic of many poor countries.

3.2. Adjustment and Personality

Several researchers (e.g. Grove and Torbiörn, 1985) see cross-cultural adjustment as the extent to which individuals feel psychologically comfortable in a new cultural context [16]. The extent to which a newcomer feels psychologically comfortable in a new culture largely depends on the following positive response to cultural differences; family situation; dispositional and motivational factors; previous international experience; linguistic factors; personality factors. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) found that personality factors facilitating cross-cultural adjustment include: willingness and ability to form relationships with members of the host culture, ability to tolerate social and cultural

isolation and a non-judgmental approach to new societies [17].

The most established and validated model of personality is the five-factor model (Schneider and Hough, 1995) [18]. The 'big five' factors are extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. When Huang et al. (2005) studied expatriate adjustment in Taiwan, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience were found to facilitate general living adjustment - perhaps because these traits increase people's ability to tolerate stress and frustration. Byron and Baldrige (2007) argue that conscientiousness is a reliable predictor of good job performance in many cultural settings [19]. The researchers also found that people low in neuroticism are higher in emotional stability and more relaxed and secure under pressure; and that extroverted people are outgoing, talkative and sociable, and experience more positive emotions than less extroverted persons.

Positive and optimistic individuals are more likely than pessimistic and confused individuals to successfully adjust to living and working in a new society. They are more likely to accept conditions in a foreign country. When Benish-Weisman (2009) interviewed emigrants from the former Soviet Union who emigrated to Israel, the interviews revealed the key role of a positive disposition in facilitating adjustment. When respondents were asked to write about their experiences, some of the narratives were coherent and well-structured, reflecting a positive attitude and wellbeing. They contained well-organized episodes - for instance, describing such goals as finding a job or learning Hebrew. These individuals had made a good adjustment to Israeli society.

By contrast, emigrants who had not adjusted to Israeli society produced narratives that were fragmented and lacked coherence. Negative emotions destroyed their coherence:

“Many narratives had a victimization theme. The storyline was circular and repetitive. The same events occurred again and again. It was as if the individuals concerned lacked the ability to control events or their own negative feelings” [20].

4. Conclusions

Cross-cultural communication competence is an important predictor of adjustment. Willingness to learn the local language makes it easier to communicate with colleagues and the local people, and contributes to adjustment. But entering a new culture can be stressful and it also gives opportunities to grow both professionally and emotionally. Newcomers start to see how culture moulds the behaviour of members of the culture - and how their own behaviour is influenced by culture. Such self-awareness helps free them from ethnocentric assumptions of

superiority that can cripple communication with members of other cultures. Well-motivated individuals with positive attitudes towards the new society tend to adjust quickly. But for some people adjustment is a lengthier process. Refugees and some permanent immigrants may fail to adjust because they are oppressed by feelings that they have irretrievably lost their own culture, language, family and friends. The traditional model presupposes that cross-cultural adaptation primarily involves overcoming culture shock. However, this model is being supplanted by one that emphasizes the importance of thorough preparation and engagement with local communities. Integration into any new cultural context predominantly hinges on an individual's capacity to communicate effectively with fellow group members.

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