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Culture Shock-One of Common Problems in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Communicating successfully with people from different cultures can be a real challenge. Cultural differences may lead to tensions, arguments, and even wars between peoples and nations. This paper deals with one of the most common problems in intercultural communication-cultural shock, it introduces its concepts and basic traits, causes and symptoms, stages of adjustment and strategies of overcoming culture shock with the aim of improving intercultural communication competence for smoothing intercultural communication.

Key words: Cultural shock; Intercultural communication; Stages of adjustment; Intercultural communication competence

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INTRODUCTION

Do you think studying in a different country is something that sounds very exciting? Are you like many young people who leave home to study in another country thinking you will have lots of fun? In spite of these advantages, however, there are also some challenges you will encounter, you may experience something unfamiliar to you in an alien place. Those unfamiliar things include language, climate, religion, food and educational system, how people make decisions, spend their leisure time, resolve conflicts and express their feeling and emotions,

body language such as messages on hand, face and body movements etc.. All these can create confusion and emotional stress, dealing with the differences can be very unsettling from which you may suffer from a feeling of anxiety, everyone experiences the symptoms of culture shock somewhat differently, but there are real physical and psychological impacts to those people who just arrive in a new culture.

1. WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK

As culture is the guidelines for our behaviors, we depend on our cultures. It gives us stability and security because we know how to understand and respond to what is happening. However, if we move to another culture or encounter people from an alien culture, our views may clash with the different beliefs, norms, values and traditions that exist in those countries. We may have difficulty adjusting to a new culture and to those parts of the culture not familiar to us, as a result we may suffer from anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, confusion, etc.). This is so called culture shock. It is really hard for us to give a perfect identification to culture shock, we may just get some concepts about it, Culture shock is the feeling of confusion, insecurity, and anxiety caused by the strangeness of a new environment (kohut & Baxter, 1987, p.432). It is the traumatic experience that individual may encounter when entering a different culture (Rogers & Sterinfatt, 1999, p.212). As Furnham & Bochner suggested, culture shock means “psychological reactions to an unfamiliar environment”, K. Oberg, an anthropologist by whom the term culture shock was first introduced suggested culture shock should be adjustments to new culture environment . According to Mitchell (2000, p.30) culture shock is one of the realities of working in a different culture, and it is inevitable like death and taxes and cyclical. In reading through the

extensive body of culture shock, one is instantly struck by the wide range of definitions that have been used to describe it. All of the definitions have in common that they see culture shock as an unpleasant reaction to being faced with a foreign culture, besides reactions to culture shock vary, but there are distinct stages in the adjustment process and each stage in the process is characterized by “symptoms” or outward signs typifying certain kinds of behavior, probably the best strategy for coping with the various impacts of culture shock is to make a conscious effort to adjust to the new culture, though it may require personal awareness, patience, and perseverance.

2. CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS

Culture shock occurs when everything is different, including language, food, currency, values, beliefs and even traffic pattern, mealtimes and sleep patterns and so on. You feel like fish out of water, as you lose familiar surroundings. You cannot find the familiar signs and symbols of everyday communication. You feel like acting a role in a play in which everyone but you have a script (Kohut & Baxter, 1987, p.53).

There are different views of culture shock. One is the disease view. The culture-shocked person who experiences a breakdown in communication, is unable to cope, and feels isolated and lost. The person thus develops a number of defensive (and sometimes offensive) attitudes and behaviors to protect the mind from the confusion of an entirely new situation. Such people can experience many different emotional and mental difficulties. They can become extremely frustrated, angry, and rejecting of the new culture. They consider the host country bad, ridiculous, stupid, or hopeless—precisely because they themselves feel bad, ridiculous, stupid, or hopeless. Culture -shock person may start to glorify the home country, suddenly everything about the native land is wonderful compared to this terrible new place! Feelings of helplessness about delays and confusions can turn rapidly in resentment. People in culture shock may feel harmed, tricked, deceived, injured, or ignored- or all of these.

People can become physically ill from the stress of culture shock. Ulcers, headaches, stomachaches, backaches, dizziness, excessive sleepiness—these and many of the other symptoms can often be traced back to an underlying culture shock condition. Common symptoms of culture shock may include antagonism and cynicism about the new culture, loss of patience, depressing and absent mindedness, overwhelming fear of being cheated or robbed; overeating, oversleeping, substance abuse, declining invitation and preferring to stay at home to read books and watch videos shipped in back from home (Mitchell, 2000, p.32), if its extreme, some individuals are rendered completely incapable of daily functioning.

An anthropologist Kalvero Oberg mentioned six aspect of culture shock

- Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations;
- A sense of loss and feeling of deprivations in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions;
- Being rejected by and/or rejecting member;
- Confusion in roles, role expectations, values, feeling and self-identity;
- Surprise, anxiety even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural difference;
- Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

There is another, much more positive meaning of culture shock called the self-awareness view of culture shock. Culture shock can be part of a positive learning experience. Culture shock, if handled well, can lead to profound self-awareness and growth. Peter Adler, a well-known expert on culture shock, says that positive cross-cultural learning experiences typically:

- Involve change and movement from one cultural frame of reference to another;
- Are personally and uniquely important to the individual;
- Force the person into some form of self-examination;
- Involve severe frustration, anxiety, and personal pain, at least for a while;
- Cause the person to deal with relationships and processed related to his or her role as an outsider;
- Encourage the person to try new attitudes and behaviors; and
- Allow the person to compare and contrast constantly.

The strong, creative person can deal with culture shock positively, instead of sinking into steady complaints about the culture, wallowing in very real physical ailments or running away at the first opportunity. Culture shock can become an opportunity for growth.

3. STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT

At least four essential stages of adjustments occur during culture shock.

The first stage is called “the honey moon”. In this stage, you are excited about living in a different place, and everything seems to be marvelous, you like everything, and everybody seems to be so nice to you, also the amusement of life in a new culture seems to have no ending.

However, the second stage of culture shock appears. This is “the hostility stage”. You begin to notice that not everything is as good as you had originally thought it was. You become tired of many things about the new culture. Moreover, people don’t treat you like a guest anymore. Everything that seemed to be so wonderful at first is now awful, and everything makes you feel distressed and tired.

After you deal with your hostile feelings, recognition of the temporary nature of culture shock begins. Then you come to the third stage called “recovery”. In this stage, you start feeling more positive and you try to develop comprehension of everything you don’t understand. The whole situation starts to become more favorable, you recover from the symptoms of the first two stages and you adjust yourself to the new norms, values and even beliefs and traditions of the new country. You begin to see that even though the distinction of the culture is different from your own, it has elements that you can learn to appreciate.

The last stage of culture shock is called “adjustment”. In this stage, you have reached a point you actually feel good because you have learned enough to understand the new culture. The things that initially made you feel uncomfortable or strange are now things that you understand. This acquisition understanding alleviates much of the stress. Now, you feel comfortable, you have adjusted to the new culture.

4. COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Usually in the hostility stage of your adjustment to a new culture, you devise some mechanisms to help you cope and to protect yourself against the effects of culture shock, one type of coping mechanism is called “repression”. This happens when you pretend that everything is acceptable and that nothing bothers you. Another type of defense mechanism is called “regression”. This occurs when you start to act as if you are younger than that you actually are. You act like a child, you forget everything, and sometimes you become careless and irresponsible. The third kind of defense mechanism is called “isolation”. You would rather be home alone, and you don’t want to communicate with anybody. The last type of defense mechanism is called “rejection”. With this coping mechanism, you think you don’t need anybody, you feel you are coping fine alone, so you don’t try to ask for help.

The defense mechanisms you utilize in the hostility stage are not helpful. If you only occasionally use one of these coping mechanisms to help yourself survive, that is acceptable. You must be cautious, however. These mechanisms can really hurt you because they prevent you from making necessary adjustments to the new culture.

Instead of the coping mechanism mentioned above, the following solutions are very helpful to deal with culture shock.

a) Have an open mind

While it’s certainly tough to feel frustrated or confused in your new surroundings, try not to form an opinion about the new culture too soon. You may be quick to judge the food, manners and communication styles and as a result, you may want to do things the way you are used to do. Don’t think of the host culture as better or worse, just different. If you have this kind of

attitude, you will be more willing to try new things and win new friends and allies

b) Don’t expect everything to be perfect too soon

You may feel frustrated that you suffer from culture shock, especially since you probably spent so much time preparing. No matter how much information you need, or how well you speak the host language, it is natural to feel overwhelmed sometimes, if you give yourself some time, things will gradually get better. Once you realize that your trouble is due to your own lack of understanding of other people’s cultural background and your own lack of means of communication rather than the hostility of an alien environment, you will also realize that you yourself can gain this understanding and these means of communication. And the sooner you do this, the sooner culture shock will disappear.

• Participate

This is obvious, but everybody needs to be reminded, just watching life go on around you isn’t good enough, you really need to try things for yourself. Don’t worry about making mistakes people in your host country will generally be very understanding and willing to help if you have questions. If you are unsure of what to do in a formal setting, follow others; lead, active participation is important, your efforts will be rewarded.

c) Take good care of you

Take care of your health, try all the effective ways to reduce physical and mental stress, it will help alleviate the strain of culture shock (Mitchell, 2000, p.34)

Besides, here are some topics that have something to do with culture shock.

a) Getting to know target language with the acquisition of cultural knowledge

As we know, communication is the exchange of information, or in other words, the exchange of meaning. When communicating, you attempt to let your communication partners know what you mean and at the same time you try to get their meaning, not only their words. As the meaning of words (symbols) is determined by culture, culture knowledge is essential to the understanding of your communication partner with a different culture. Different cultures have different sets of knowledge, social systems, life styles, values and distinct communication features. So learning a foreign language should go hand in hand with the acquisition of these noteworthy cultural facts, especially attitudes, beliefs and values that influence the meaning of the language. If not, the use of language may cause culture shock.

b) Cultivate a nonjudgmental attitude

As we all know, Ethnocentric attitude prevents understanding people from other cultures and often leads to prejudice and discrimination, it is also at the roots of undervaluation and projecting similarity. In order to prevent ethnocentrism from blocking effective communication, we need to cultivate a nonjudgmental attitude toward cultural differences.

Firstly, we should be highly aware of the habitual and subconscious nature of our ethnocentric tendency and on guard against it.

Secondly, emphasizing description by observing what is actually said and done, rather than interpreting or evaluating on one's own culture so that accurate information can be gathered.

Thirdly, accepting and respecting cultural differences. It means overcoming the unconscious and habitual tendency of judging other cultures as inferior to our own culture, or judging others by our cultural standards, instead, respecting values and customs of other cultures.

c) Develop flexibility and adaptability

The ability to be flexible and adaptable in each communication situation is an important asset for intercultural communication. It is with great flexibility and adaptability that we will be able, with little discomfort, to successfully avoid culture shock when confronting new and ambiguous situations. By flexibility and adaptability, I mean the ability to adjust ourselves to culture differences as well as a new culture.

To develop this ability, we need to learn how to respond to new conditions, people, and situations. Efforts should be made to identify these culture differences and make necessary adjustments to our personalized communication style. In order to be flexible, we should avoid being self-conscious, tense and anxious and learn to observe and decode other cultures. Considering timing, physical setting and customs can certainly help in crease flexibility in selecting our words and actions.

d) Develop empathy

The next suggestion for improvement is to develop empathy—be able to see things from the point of view of others so that we can better know and adjust to the other people. Perhaps the most common of all barriers to empathy is a constant self-focus. It is difficult to gather information about the other person, and to reflect on that information if we are consumed with thoughts of ourselves. However, for intercultural communication to be successful, we must all learn to go beyond personal boundaries and try to learn about the experiences of people who are not art of our daily lives. We must realize that we live in an interconnected world, and we must therefore be motivated to understand everyone-regardless of how much we seem separated from them by either distance or culture.

5. IMPROVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Intercultural communication competence is the degree to which an individual is able to exchange information effectively and appropriately with individuals who are

culturally unlike others. Individuals vary greatly in their ability to communicate with culturally dissimilar (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999, p.221)

It is evident that intercultural communication is challenging and demanding. Culture shock caused by culture differences might arise in the process of intercultural communication. However, we can, with practice and efforts, develop the necessary skills to overcome these problems. We have good reasons to be confident as intercultural communication, however wide the difference between cultures may be, is not impossible. Henry Hoijer has said: "No culture is wholly isolated, self-contained, and unique. There are important resemblances between all known cultures -resemblances that stem in part from diffusion, which itself is evidence of successful intercultural communication" (Singer, 1987, p.7). The thing we should constantly keep in mind is the cultural differences that we must deal within intercultural communication.

SUMMARY

With more and more people coming to contact with culturally disparate people, intercultural communication becomes more apparent. However, culture shock is not something you can avoid in intercultural communication, the unawareness of it and lack of specific social skills make the lives of cross-culturally travelers difficult in a new culture. But living in another culture is undoubtedly an educational experience. When you have completely adjusted to a new culture, you can more fully enjoy it. You learn how to interact with other people and you learn a considerable amount about life in a culture that is not your own. Furthermore, learning about other cultures and how to adjust to the shock of living in them enables you to gain insight into your own society and learn more about yourself.

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