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## Intercultural Adaptation in the Context of Short Term Mission Trips

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### ABSTRACT

*Intercultural adaptation is a critical issue in international tourism. Good quality interactions can provide satisfaction for both tourists and local communities. This paper presents a study of intercultural adaptation in the context of international short-term mission trips using qualitative research methods. The objective of this study was to understand the process of intercultural adaptation so that existing theory on intercultural adaptation can be informed and, at the same time, insights can be gained with respect to short-term mission travel as a new form of tourism for which such intercultural adaptation seems to be an important condition.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural adaptation, mission travel, host-guest interactions, intercultural communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mission trips are an emerging form of tourism. The purpose of mission trips is to convey religious messages to the people at the mission trip destination. Therefore, mission travelers have a strong desire to directly communicate with local residents. Also, they try to establish a close relationship with the locals. In other words, mission travelers are assumed to seek closer contact and more personal exchanges than other travelers with individuals in the host community, beyond those residents who are directly involved in the offering of tourism products. Thus, the host/tourist relationships are particularly important in the context of mission trips.

When tourists communicate directly with local residents from other cultures, cross-cultural adaptation becomes a central issue. Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process that individuals go through when trying to adjust to the differences they encounter in new cultural environments (Grushina, 2009). Tourists' experiences of cultural differences have attracted interest in diverse academic fields such as cultural anthropology, sociology of language, and communication science (Gudykunst, 1986; Kim, 1986). Intercultural communication studies especially deal with the direct encounters and interactions of individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Kim, 2005). Many intercultural communication scholars have examined individuals crossing cultural boundaries and adapting to new and unfamiliar environments. Even though cross-cultural adaptation is a crucial theme in international tourism, most studies on intercultural exchanges between hosts and guests focus on the perspective of the receiving community and especially those who work in the tourism industry (e.g. Gmelch, 2003). Those studies that deal with guests mostly look at negative emotions often termed culture shock or

culture confusion (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Hottola, 2004) and not at the potential of successful adaptation. In addition, many sojourner studies tend to be focused on practical issues and guidelines for those who have to undergo cultural adaptation, while lacking sufficient theoretical grounding (Grushina, 2009). Also, most intercultural communication studies on sojourners' cultural adaptations have focused on international students studying abroad rather than cross-cultural tourists.

International mission trips are an emerging form of tourism that has received relatively little attention from the tourism research field. International mission travelers want to directly communicate with local residents in the host community because their main purpose is to deliver their religious messages to them (Klinkerman, 2002). Also, mission trips often lead mission travelers to communities with little touristic infrastructure and little previous contact with foreigners. All these factors make cultural adaptation very important but also very challenging. This paper presents a study of cultural adaptation in the context of international short-term mission trips. The objective of this study was to understand the process of intercultural adaptation so that existing theory on cultural adaptation can be informed and, at the same time, insights can be gained with respect to short-term mission travel as a new form of tourism for which such cultural adaptation seems to be an important condition. Since the focus was on theory-building rather than testing, a qualitative research approach was selected.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Intercultural adaptation research**

As globalization expands and facilitates an ever greater array of cross-cultural interactions, issues of how to promote intercultural communication and to reduce the ethnocentric view of people have obtained great attention from diverse academic fields. Fostering intercultural adaptation when people actually travel plays an important role in this endeavor. Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) explain that intercultural adaptation includes transformations of the traveler's way of feeling, thinking, and behaving. Milstein (2005) also mentions that in some cases, travelers describe changes in their sense of self, both in how they experience their own culture and in how they think about their life paths. Several studies (e.g. Yang et al., 2006; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) deal with the experience of cross-cultural adaptation not only to understand the successful adaptation of the sojourners but also the quality of interactions between people from different cultures. These interactions are of specific interest to intercultural communication research (Gu & Maley, 2008; Kim, 2008; Yang et al., 2006; Kim, 2005; Milstein, 2005). The main focus of intercultural communication research has been on the direct interactions of individuals who have various cultural backgrounds (Kim, 2005).

There have been two approaches to intercultural adaptation in intercultural communication research. Some research focuses on problem solving. For example, they attempt to predict sojourners' capability of overcoming culture shock before the sojourn (Kim, 2001; 1987). Other studies have stressed positive experiences. Furnham and Bochner (1986) examined the personal growth of individuals after cross-cultural experiences and came to the conclusion that cross-cultural experiences make an individual more adaptable and flexible. Kim and Ruben (1988) integrated these two approaches to intercultural adaptation, that is, the problem solving and the personal growth approach. Kim (2001) claims that all cross cultural experiences are problematic and, thus, provide opportunities for transformation. She states that cross cultural experiences cause difficulties for people and so they "do and must change some of their old ways

so as to carry out their daily activities and achieve improved quality of life in the new environment (p. 21)”.

Kim proposes an integrative approach to intercultural adaptation, explaining the dynamic process of cross-cultural adaptation. According to Kim’s theory (2001), communication factors are placed in the center of cross-cultural adaptation. Both quantity and quality of communication in a new culture are essential to successful intercultural adaptation.

The theory provides five key dimensions and factors which facilitate or hinder the adaptation process: 1) Personal communication is a crucial factor influencing adaptation. Personal communication refers to “all the internal mental activities that occur in individuals that dispose and prepare them to act and react in certain ways in actual social situations (Kim, 2001, p. 72).” Sojourners realize that to achieve the success of adaptation, their internal communication systems should appropriately and sufficiently overlap with those of the hosts. Personal communication serves as a starting point for the adaption process and is connected with host social communication. 2) Host social communication means that two or more individuals interact with each other in a cross cultural context. Social communication involves host interpersonal and mass communication. Mass media such as newspapers, television, movies are used for social communication. Also, interpersonal communication activities, that is, face-to-face interactions, are included in social communication. Both personal and social communication dimensions are interacting under the conditions of the new environment. 3) The new environment serves as the cultural context for personal and social communication activities. All critical interactions with the host community occur in the host environment. Therefore, the host environment influences the nature of the adaptation process. 4) In the adaptive process, the dimension of predisposition works as the initial parameter. Predisposition is defined as “the internal conditions of the strangers themselves (Kim, 2001, p. 82)”. Each stranger starts the adaptation process with their own personality and characteristics. For example, some people may have an open mind to new cultures but for others, it may not be easy to accept the change of the environment. Accordingly, predisposition affects the degree of a stranger’s “adaptive potential (p. 82)”. 5) As the last dimension, personal transformation refers to the chief outcome of the adaptation process. Through the process of cross cultural adaptation, strangers experience transformation of their self identity. Personal transformation is the gradual and broad, unconscious process of adaptation. It is seen as a person’s changed behavior and thinking as a result of a substantial amount of cross cultural adaptation experience.

Much cross cultural research (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008; Masgoret, 2006; Oberg, 2006; Milstein, 2005; Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995; Zapf, 1991) has only focused on one dimension of the integrative theory proposed by Kim. Zapf (1991) and Oberg (2006) deal with cultural shock in terms of adjustment to new environments. They examine how one can recover from cultural shock. Cultural shock can be one barrier which impedes the adaptive process but the recovery from cultural shock does not necessarily indicate intercultural adaptation. Milstein (2005) investigates self-efficacy of sojourners. According to his findings, a positive correlation exists between the challenge of sojourners and perceived change in self-efficacy. Masgoret (2005) examines the interrelationship of a number of variables which influence individuals’ cross-cultural transitions. The results show that previous experiences with the culture and communicative competence can aid in the successful adaptation of sojourners to a new culture. Martin and his colleagues (1995) explore the relationship between pre-departure expectations and the overall evaluations of the intercultural experience. Their findings indicate a positive relationship between the violation of expectation and the overall evaluation of the sojourn

experience. All of those studies used the statistical research method to examine their research question. However, quantitative research cannot fully explain the process of intercultural adaptation. Intercultural adaptation is a complex and integrative process. Therefore, this study utilizes the qualitative research design to better understand the process of intercultural adaptation. Mission trips serve as the specific context of the study.

### **Mission trips as a new form of tourism**

The study described in this paper examines intercultural adaptation of mission travelers on international short-term mission trips. Missionary work is an age-old phenomenon, but its form has changed as paradigmatic changes in tourism have occurred (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Uriely, 2005; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003; Aramberri, 2001; Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001; Wearing, 2001; Uriely, 1997). This new form of mission travel is conducted over a short period of travel time ranging from a week to two years (Friesen, 2004) and it is mainly undertaken by teenagers and college students, rather than vocational missionaries. These mission trips usually include voluntary activities such as building houses, teaching English, or providing medical and agricultural services (MacDonald, 2006; Klinkerman, 2002) in addition to spreading religious messages. Over the last 20 years, it has gradually gained popularity as a new form of tourism (Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciofica, & Gorton, 2006). According to USA Today (MacDonald, 2006), about 1.6 million U.S. residents experienced short-term mission trips abroad in 2005. Moreover, Priest and Dischinger (2006) mentioned that in 1996, mission trip participants were just over 50,000 in the U.S.A, but the number of participants increased to more than 350,000 by 2001. Many studies also show a steady growth of international short-term mission travelers (Reese, 2007; DeTemple, 2006; Friesen, 2004; Schwarts, 2003; Walker, 2003).

According to Swartzentruber (2008), international short-term mission trips began in the 1970's and they serve as a method of equipping students with cross-cultural experience. In the 1980's and 1990's, the number of mission travelers increased with the growth of all types of cross-cultural tourism. It is a form of new tourism that provides valuable meanings to both hosts and tourists while their interactions and shared experiences occur. A mission trip is defined by the interaction between hosts and tourists. Most mission travelers have a strong desire to convey their religious message to local people even though they spend most of their time serving them with voluntary work. This can effectively only happen through direct exchanges.

### **International short-term mission trips as cross cultural experiences**

As established above, face-to-face communication between hosts and tourists lie at the heart of mission trips. Mission travelers need more interactions with hosts than other tourists do because their main object is not centered on volunteer work alone. They want to win converts as well as alleviate the physical suffering of hosts (MacDonald, 2006; Klinkerman, 2002). In articles by Klinkerman (2002) and Brumsted (2003), it is reported that most interviewed mission trip participants consider their main duty to be missionary work. Therefore, intercultural adaptation is a critical issue for mission travelers because direct host/tourist exchanges on mission trips are more important than in any other forms of tourism. A few studies (Priest & Dischinger, 2007; DeTemple, 2006; Walling et al., 2006; Beek, 2004) deal with cross cultural interactions during mission trips.

Priest and Dischinger (2007) investigate the impact of mission trips at an ethnocentric level on the participants. Their findings indicate that short term mission trips can lower the ethnocentrism level of mission trip participants. According to them, after mission trips, the

attitudes of their study participants towards Mexicans as hosts significantly improved. The way that tourists can decrease their ethnocentrism lies in positive interactions with the hosts. Walling and others (2006) also studied the relationship between cross-cultural reentry and cultural identity in short term mission trip participants. Their findings imply that mission travelers experience challenges because of negative reactions of other cultures. Although participants initially have difficulties adjusting to a foreign culture, they express that they felt the hospitality of the other culture, and all participants reported their overall experiences as extremely good. DeTemple' (2006) studied the effects of mission trip participants on a host community. He argues that mission travelers provide a change in worldview that encourages political action that may lead to positive and long-term change. Although above mentioned studies explain the effect of a mission trip in terms of host and tourist interactions, they do not show the whole process of intercultural adaptation in mission travelers. Thus, research on intercultural adaptation was conducted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study purports to examine the process of intercultural adaptation as perceived by participants of international mission trips. Therefore, an interpretive research method fits the purpose of this study best as exploring the meaning of intercultural adaptation as a social phenomenon in mission trips is the major goal. Through participants' stories and their narratives, the meaning of their experience is constructed. Friesen (2004) points out that it is difficult to measure the impact of mission trips. They affirm that rich and detailed data could emerge through a qualitative research process. An interpretive approach is considered the most appropriate research design to examine complex concepts of intercultural adaptation and to understand the multidimensional meaning of international mission travelers' experiences in other cultures.

### **Sample and procedure**

Ten participants were voluntarily recruited for this study through snowball sampling. Eight were students of Texas A&M University and two were church leaders. Five were male and five were female. The ages range from 21 to 62 years. All of them had multiple experiences with international mission trips. Informed consent was obtained from all of the participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted for 45 to 60 minutes for one participant. It was a semi-structured interview. Questions were designed to allow the participant to consider the research topic, that is, the process of intercultural adaptation in mission trips. All interviews were audio recorded. Transcripts were made directly from the recording. The written transcripts were then analyzed.

### **Analysis**

Kim's (2001) model of intercultural adaptation served as the basis for the analysis of the data. The five dimensions of the model were used as categories into which emerging themes from the text were coded. The goal was to find evidence for the different dimensions of the model and to examine their specific relationships in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

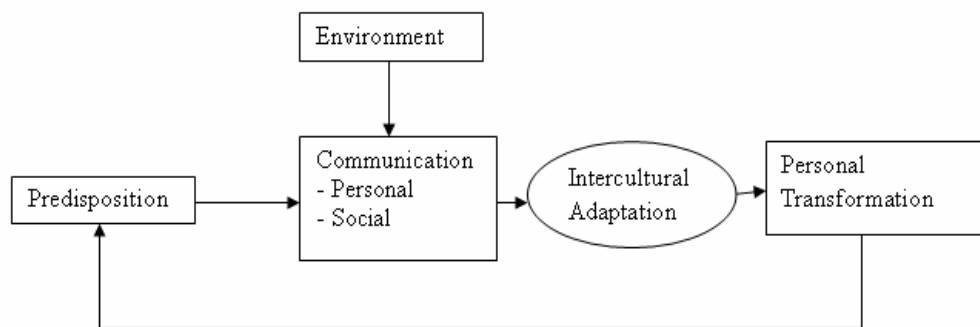
## **FINDINGS**

### **Intercultural adaptation**

Adaptation is considered a complex and dynamic process that leads to a qualitative transformation of the individual (Kim, 2000, p. 88). Based on the integrative theory of

intercultural adaptation, the five dimensions, i.e. predisposition, environment, personal communication, social communication, and personal transformation help define the principal nature of the process of intercultural adaptation.

The findings from this study, as illustrated below, support the theory that both personal and social communication factors mediate the intercultural process and the environment serves as a factor that either facilitates or inhibits communication or leads to certain forms of communication. As an initial factor, predisposition affects communication factors. Communication sets the stage for intercultural adaptation. Through the process of intercultural adaptation, individuals experience personal transformation. Such personal transformation means that predispositions change. Thus, the findings indicate a linear process with a loop (Figure 1). Overall, Kim's model is empirically verified through the findings.



**Figure 1**  
**A Process Model of Intercultural Adaptation**

### **Predisposition**

Predisposition emerged from the data in two forms. First, participants reported that their personality tends to be adventurous. Second, participants described their trips as planned and voluntary. Therefore, they said that they were prepared for the trip and prepared for the change.

### Adventurousness

Two participants expressed their personalities as being adventurous. They said that they like to meet people in other cultures and they enjoy encountering new environments and new people.

“I have a very high sense of adventure. I really enjoy being over there...” (T).

“~ personally I'm pretty adventurous so I was very lucky and very blessed in either place, I didn't really have that many problems” (J1).

J1 expressed that he was adventurous and so he did not have many problems communicating with native hosts. Also, T said that she personally preferred international mission trips to domestic mission trips. Their responses show that adventurous personalities positively influenced their intercultural experiences.

## Preparedness

Voluntary and planned trips are likely to involve greater effort in preparing mission travelers before they enter the host community. Most participants said that they underwent a voluntary preparation period before their trips.

“We had to read several books about culture and that goes a lot with being prepare for unexpected. We had a lot of training in that” (J1).

“One thing we talk about is that those who volunteer for missionary and humanitarian work, have a much higher intercultural success rate than those in the corporate world because there is no preparation and also because volunteers choose to go there. They have a different motivation for going” (B).

Through these reports, we can see how important the preparation factor is in successful intercultural adaptation.

## **Environment**

In terms of environment as a facilitating factor, hosts’ positive attitudes toward mission travelers emerged as a subtheme. Most participants mentioned the hosts’ positive attitudes toward them. The receptivity of the host people toward mission travelers facilitates mission travelers’ motivation to adjust to the host culture. Participants described how host communities welcomed them and how this influenced their satisfaction with their intercultural experiences.

“They are so good at that. They print posters and they have feasts and welcome parties. ... They are usually very inviting and very welcoming. There has never been any hostility” (T).

These statements illustrate that hosts’ attitudes as an external factor can positively or negatively affect the intercultural experiences of mission travelers. Some participants explained that there existed hostility in some places and they would not like to go there again.

## **Personal communication**

Participants reported on the importance of their overall capacity to involve themselves in communication with hosts. This includes language ability, their adaptive motivation, and flexibility.

## Language ability

Most participants described language ability as a crucial factor in communicating with host people. Language ability helps mission travelers perceive and process the host culture appropriately and effectively. Also, people who can speak the hosts’ language will have more opportunities to interact with the hosts, and this influences the relationship with hosts.

“The language barrier was probably the most but several of our people in our trip are from Mexico and fluent in Spanish and Brazil was Portuguese and Portuguese is similar to Spanish but apparently different enough that – people that who speak Spanish weren’t able to follow along a few of the time. And they would just get completely lost and not understand” (J1).

## Adaptive motivation



Participants showed their willingness to participate and functionally fit in with the host culture. They reported that they attempted to behave appropriately in the host environment.

“You know there were little things we had to learn before we went. One thing we say is, if it’s not OK in their culture, then don’t do it” (B).

“So, it’s important not to be offensive if somebody eats a certain food, we are not used to eating that we don’t want to offend somebody by refusing and saying “Oh no, that’s gross, we don’t want to eat that” (E).

In their descriptions, we can see how they make an effort to adjust to the host culture. This effort to functionally fit with the host environment facilitates their intercultural adaptation.

### Flexibility

In participants’ reports, great openness toward new experiences was found. Their mindset toward a new cultural environment is less prejudicial and they do not maintain a rigid and fixed view of other cultures.

“As long as you are open and respectful you can learn a lot about the other people’s culture” (J2).

“I learned to be flexible, positive no matter what happens” (E).

### **Social communication**

Mission travelers have direct interactions with hosts because they attempt to convey their religious messages to host people whenever possible. Thus, their social communication with hosts is very important for the purposes of their trips. Their social connections with hosts can be divided into quantity of host ties and quality of host ties.

#### Quantity of host ties

All participants reported that they tried to have opportunities to communicate with hosts as often as they could. Most of them said that they stayed with host families. The quantity of host ties is related to the length of travel time. T reported that the longer the trip and the more time spent there, the more opportunities to communicate with hosts. B also said that it was difficult to have a relationship with hosts because of the length of time. Quantity of host ties indicate how many opportunities to communicate with hosts there are, and this influences the relationship with hosts.

#### Quality of host ties

Some participants reported that they still keep in contact with a few individuals from the host community. Some of them expressed that they had formed a friendship. This means that their relationship is not a one-time contact and they maintain a close relationship with hosts. Through such relationships, participants can gain an opportunity to learn more about the host’s culture and familiarize themselves with it.

“Actually friends I met in Thailand, today is the last day of Thai New Year, and I just talked to several of them just this morning. By email and Facebook. Facebook is the best” (J1).

“I’m still in contact with a lot of my students and others from the Thai church.”(J2)

### **Personal transformation**

Participants shared their satisfaction with their experiences and their change since their trips. For most of them, their international mission trip experiences are evaluated positively. They expressed their satisfaction with their intercultural experiences in terms of relationships with hosts. Also, they shared their perspective on their personal change. Their description of changes illustrates the process of intercultural adaptation. According to the findings, it seems that as a result, mission travelers experience greater awareness of the relative nature of values and of the universal aspect of human nature. They can have greater compassion and sensitivity toward people from different cultures.

### Satisfaction with the relationship with host people

They positively evaluated their experiences. Especially in terms of their relationships with the host communities, they expressed that they would like to go to the same place again.

“I would like to go to all those places again. I loved them all” (J2).

“The people who go back to the same place over and over again because they love the language, people and culture and their relationships go deeper and deeper” (T).

### Perspectives

T described her changes after the trips. For her, the mission trip is more than just a trip. It changes her perspective of herself and her world view. Also, as a leader of the mission trip group, she evaluated whether her team members also underwent changes in their perspectives.

“I think that usually they return less egocentric because they realize that other people are people too.....It changes more of the broad things. So maybe before people go they are thinking about college, they are thinking about graduating, they are thinking about money, about the American dream. But after they go they realize that they have a lot and it helps them to be more generous and look for more opportunities to serve, even right here in College station. I like to call it outward thinking” (T).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined intercultural adaptation in the context of short-term, international mission trips by using an interpretive research method. The findings confirmed the importance of the dimensions put forward by Kim (2001). Most importantly, all participants expressed a substantial change after the trip, suggesting that intercultural adaptation led to profound personal transformations. They reported transformation in their perspectives and attitudes toward others. They recognized that through the mission trip, they can better understand others. Their satisfaction with the relationship with hosts is described in their reports. They noted that they very positively evaluated their intercultural experiences, especially with regards to their relationships with hosts.

This process of intercultural adaptation is influenced by both personal and social communication factors. In participants’ responses, it is indicated that three themes of personal communication - language ability, adaptive motivation, and flexibility – facilitated their adaptation to hosts’ cultures. In other words, their overall capacity to encode and decode hosts’ information appropriately helps them to easily adjust to the host environment. Also, they described that they

had formal and informal contacts with host people. They made an effort to have opportunities to communicate with the host people due to the purpose of their trips. The more they communicate with hosts, the more opportunities to learn about the hosts' culture they have. Therefore, both personal and social communications affect successful intercultural adaptation. Without the impact of the environment, intercultural adaptation cannot be fully understood. All participants said that they felt the hosts expressed hospitality.

This means that hosts' positive attitudes toward mission travelers greatly influence intercultural adaptation. Predisposition as an important factor was also clearly identified by the participants as an important factor. Most of them reported adventurous personalities and they stated that their adventurousness positively aided them in adjusting to the new environment. Further, participants' trips were usually planned and they were voluntary. This implies that they were able and willing to prepare for the change to adapt to a new environment.

This study applied the integrative theory of intercultural adaptation to the context of mission trips. The findings of this study confirmed the effectiveness of short-term international mission trips in staging intercultural adaptation leading to personal transformation. Through the intercultural adaptation theory, it is supported that international mission trips can provide participants an opportunity to reduce their egocentric attitudes toward other cultures. It can be assumed that this kind of tourism will continue to increase and gain more importance among many cross-cultural tourists. Therefore, it is suggested that the topic of mission trips be conceptualized, evaluated and discussed in tourism research in terms of intercultural adaptation.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

This study contributes to the intercultural adaptation literature by confirming and at the same time expanding Kim's model. It also contributes to the resident attitude literature in that it stresses host hospitality as a crucial environmental factor in facilitating cultural adaptation that leads to positive personal transformation. The research further expands our knowledge of short term mission trips and calls for more research in this area. While intercultural adaptation was studied in the specific realm of mission travel, the model itself can and should be applied to other forms of alternative tourism that involve direct interactions with locals.

From a practical perspective, the study provides insights as to how intercultural adaptation can be fostered. This is especially important for providers/organizers of mission trips, voluntourism and other forms of travel that promise personal transformation and actively seek out interactions with local cultures.

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