

Culture Shock and Its Implications for Cross-Cultural Training and Culture Teaching

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Supported by the Planned Project of Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Education, Grant No. GBC1211031- the Internationalized Personnel Training Mode Research and Practice Based on School-enterprise Cooperation.

Received 1 June 2012; accepted 5 August 2012

Abstract

The present paper attempts to make a contrastive study of the disease model and the growth model of culture shock. After analyzing their similarities and differences and comparing their contributions to the cross-cultural adaptation, it points out the necessity of the combination of the two models so as to make culture shock a less stressful and more positive experience. It also provides some implications for cross-cultural training and culture teaching in China.

Key words: Culture shock; The disease model; The growth model; Cross-cultural adaptation

LI Dongfeng (2012). Culture Shock and Its Implications for Cross-Cultural Training and Culture Teaching. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(4), 70-74. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120804.1433> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120804.1433>.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a shrinking world. International business, international education, migrations and other international activities frequently expose people to alien cultures. They have to adjust and readjust themselves in order to adapt to the new environment. Stress that accompanies this process of cross-cultural adaptation occurs. The stress is termed as culture shock in contemporary works. Because

of the complexity of the issue, researchers have proposed a variety of theories from different perspectives. The researches, however, remain unsystematic. The paper probes the issue in the process of cross-cultural adaptation on the framework of cultural anthropology.

By contrasting the two influential models of culture shock, the paper has two objectives: first, it synthesizes the two models and suggests culture shock researches should focus not only on the short run effect (to alleviate the symptoms) but also on the long run individual development (to cultivate intercultural competence); second, it provides some implications for cross-cultural training and culture teaching. For culture teaching, the cultivation of culture competence is emphasized. The combination of culture-specific method and culture-general method is recommended.

1. THE DISEASE MODEL

The disease model (or the medical model) was developed to deal with emotional disorders which originate with Sigmund Freud. The model suggests that an emotional disorder is actually an illness or disease which one can catch like a cold. It implies that it has a distinct set of symptoms which can be cured. Oberg (1960) described culture shock as an ailment with distinct symptoms and cures, thereby establishing a disease model to explain cross-cultural adjustment stress. This approach derives from researches on mental health as related to migration. These researches believe that different behavior patterns (dress, non-verbal behavior, sense of time, etc.) of migrants compared with natives make migrants like as if they are mentally disturbed and migrants' being constantly "on guard" to protect themselves against making "stupid mistakes" also makes them fatigue. And this "culture fatigue" is usually called culture shock (Samovar, 2000). Therefore they need treatments. However, the effect of culture on mental health and definition of "mental health"

are still in debate.

The main assumption of this approach is that adaptation is guided by uncertainty reduction and the reduction or control of anxiety:

We may reduce uncertainty without reducing anxiety. We reduce uncertainty by depending on positive stereotypes, favorable contact, shared networks, intergroup attitudes, a secure cultural identity, subsequent cultural similarity, developing a second language competence, and knowing about the host culture. Reducing uncertainty also is influenced by the appropriate use of uncertainty reduction strategies, the display of nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, attraction, and intimacy. Reducing anxiety, in contrast, is affected by strangers' motivation, strangers' psychological differentiation, host nationals' attitudes toward strangers, and the host cultures' policy toward strangers. (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1977, p. 132)

Stephan and Brigham (1985) believe anxiety in intergroup relations is relative to the "contact hypotheses" of intergroup relationships. According to this perspective, four factors emerge as core conditions for reducing anxiety: equal status, cooperative interdependence, supported by authority figures and interacting with other group members as individuals outside their stereotypes.

Juffer (1987) gives five reasons of culture shock, four of which depend on the deficit or disease hypothesis. First, culture shock is caused by confronting a new environment or situation. This environmental or situational explanation suggests that all persons will experience certain degrees of culture shock in foreign environment. Second, culture shock is caused by ineffectiveness of intercultural or interpersonal communication. Explaining culture shock as resulting from communication problems causing people to misunderstand or wrongly predict one another's behavior suggests that misperception is the cause of culture shock. Third, culture shock is caused by a threat to the emotional or intrapsychic well being of the sojourner. This clinical explanation emphasizes the negative effects of culture shock. Fourth, culture shock demonstrates the need to modify behavior adequately and to regain positive reinforcement from the new environment. This more behavioral perspective describes culture shock as a reaction to needs and wants, leading to inappropriate behaviors. Fifth, culture shock is caused by a "growth experience." This growth explanation of culture shock believes that culture shock is a normal experience that does not necessarily indicate deficit or abnormality.

Weaver (2000) sums up three basic causal explanations of culture shock. And two of them are based on the medical disease model. Those three explanations are: the loss of familiar cues; the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and an identity crisis. The first explanation believes behavioral or social cues (or signs and signals) provide order in interpersonal relations. Selye (1974) and Barna (1983) have done research on stress as it relates to change suggesting that change of physical environments in and of itself produces much of the stress that may be attributed to culture shock. The second

explanation emphasizes the process of interpersonal interaction. The basic assumption of this explanation is that a breakdown of communication, on both the conscious and unconscious levels, causes frustration and anxiety and is a source of alienation from others. The third explanation will be discussed in the growth model of culture shock.

Proponents of this disease model believe that an emotional disorder like culture shock has a distinct set of symptoms which can be cured. They hold that culture shock can be cured by following concrete procedures. As a result different stages were identified. Lysgaard (1955) proposes the three-phase U-curve hypotheses to depict the adjustment patterns of international students in a host culture.

Lesser and Peter (1957) propose a three-stage process of adjustment to alien culture: first, a spectator phase on arrival; second, an involvement phase; and third, a coming-to-term phase.

Oberg (1960) argues for four stages of culture shock: honeymoon stage; crisis resulting from normal daily activity; understanding and object viewing of the host culture; adjustment to host culture. Lewis and Jungman (1986) develop Oberg's theory. They think there are five or six stages of culture shock:

- a. The preliminary stage (events that occur before departure).
- b. The spectator phase (the initial weeks or months of living in another culture).
- c. The increasing participation phase.
- d. The shock phase.
- e. The adaptation phase.
- f. The reentry into home culture.

In order to give a direct and vivid perception of those stages, a hypothesis of curves comes into being. Seelye (1995) quotes a hypothesis of curves which represent rising and falling emotional intensity across time. Some see a "U-curve", with a steady depression that plateaus after a year or two, then steadily gets better as one adjust to life under different ground rules. Others see a "J-curve" with things turning sour soon after arrival in another culture, but improving steadily once you are over the hump. Some take about a "W-curve", which is really two U-curves, with the second U referring to problems the sojourner often experiences when reentering his or her home culture.

Although there are different descriptions of stages, the description of culture shock as a stage-based developmental process is shared by most of researchers writing about the culture shock experience. This sequence of stages has been referred to as deferent curves as manifestation of adjustment processes. But this curve hypothesis has been constantly questioned.

Church (1982) observes eleven empirical studies in support of the U-curve hypothesis. Five other studies,

however, fail to confirm the U-curve hypothesis.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) also comment on several problems in the U-curve hypothesis about culture shock. The most serious weakness of U-curve or a W-curve design is the implication of a smooth linear adaptive process, which is quite different from reality. Transformation occurs through series of degeneration and regeneration events or crises in a nonregular and erratic movement of change.

Weaver (2000) also argues that the disease model is “counterproductive and misleading”. It makes the person only pay attention to a clear diagnosis, a label for the disease with a list of specific symptoms instead of the theoretical explanations of cause or responsibility. He points out that “it (the disease model) causes both the observer and the participant to focus on the pathological aspects of emotional disorder rather than the growth process and positive benefits” (Weaver, 2000, p. 183). He further suggests that knowing the causes of culture shock and the process of cross-cultural adaptation may help people understand that culture shock is a normal phenomenon which does sooner or later end.

Although the U-curve and W-curve charts to illustrate the pattern of progression or phases of the disease are being criticized, the stage theory is generally accepted by most researchers.

2. THE GROWTH MODEL OF CULTURE SHOCK

The disease model of culture shock puts too much importance on the negative impacts of culture shock. However, culture shock and other cross-cultural adjustment stresses may be positive and creative force with an educational impact to stimulate, motivate, and enhance the culture traveler’s intercultural, communicative competence and even long term adaptation. Culture shock and other stressful experiences are not necessarily negative.

Adler (1975) believes culture shock is a process of intercultural learning, leading to greater self-awareness and personal growth. Adler (1991) considers culture shock a normal and natural growth or transition process as we adapt to another culture.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) conceive of the potentially positive consequences of culture shock as part of the culture learning process. As a result, they advocate a social skills approach to culture shock, where the culture travelers learn the skills, rules, and roles that are required in the new setting.

Juffer (1987) depicts culture shock as caused by a normal “growth experience” that does not necessarily indicate deficit or abnormality. Kealey (1988) notes that the Canadians in Kenya who would ultimately be the most effective in adapting to the new culture underwent the

most intense culture shock during the transition period.

Kim (1991) believes culture shock is a necessary precondition to adaptive change. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (1992) distinguish between the consequences of culture shock. On the one hand, acculturation can result in psychological conflict and social disintegration and deterioration in the quality of life. On the other hand, there is the possibility of a relatively conflict-free change in behavior by giving up one role and taking on a different role in a shift of behavior that is smooth and continuous maintaining the quality of life.

In order to emphasize the theoretical links of this process, Berry *et al.* (1992) prefer the term “acculturative stress” rather than “culture shock” as proposed by theories of illness approach. They elaborate on appropriate skills for dealing with communication difficulties such as language learning, turn taking in conversation, politeness, direct and indirect communication styles, and the appropriate use of nonverbal behaviors. They believe these examples of culture skills learning will increase the culture traveler’s intercultural communicative competence demonstrated both in the holistic adjustment of the culture traveler and learning of appropriate behaviors in more culture-specific terms.

The third causal explanation of culture shock, as Weaver sums up, is an identity crisis. He points out “culture shock allows us to give up an inadequate perceptual and problem-solving system to allow another more expanded and adequate system to be born” and “it is somewhat of a death-rebirth cycle” (Weaver, 2000, p. 181)

3. COMPARISON OF THE TWO MODELS

The disease model treats culture shock as a disease with “its own symptoms and cure”. This clinical explanation indicates the negative effects of culture shock. Advocates of this model usually view culture shock as a negative, problematic, and undesirable phenomenon to be avoided. But advocates of the growth model integrate culture shock with cross-cultural adaptation and think it a precondition to make successful adjustment. Kim is one of the representatives. Kim defined culture shock as “a manifestation of a generic process that occurs whenever the capabilities of a living system are not sufficiently adequate to the demands of an unfamiliar cultural environment” (Kim, 2004, p. 416). She adopted a positive view toward culture shock. For long-term consideration, culture shock may be very helpful for individuals to develop communication competence and gain personal growth.

These two seemingly quite different models about culture shock are actually viewing it from different angles with their respective focus. One focuses on short-term symptoms, the other on long-term consequence. It is of great importance to meet people’s different needs and make sojourners or permanent immigrants or long-

term settlers have a panoramic view of culture shock so that they can have a successful cross-cultural experience. Culture shock is considered to be the initial phase in adaptation to an alien culture. Therefore it should not be separated from the process of adaptation. Both its negative and positive effects should be discussed within this process; otherwise any discussion will be invalid.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Implications for Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural trainers are often expected to give advice on how best to adjust quickly and painlessly to another culture. Furthermore, they are to describe the other culture in a colorful manner without ambiguity or complexity. Many sojourners do not want theoretical or abstract culture-general presentations which emphasize process. Rather, they want their training short, concrete, painless, entertaining, and simple. But the trainers should have the clear purpose of helping the client anticipate the stress of cross-cultural adaptation and his or her reactions to the stress, facilitating the development of coping strategies, giving the sojourner confidence that he or she can adjust to another culture and interact effectively with host nationals, and helping the client understand the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

There are four implications that the present studies on culture shock for cross-cultural training:

First, understand the concept of culture. Culture is an abstraction which must be understood before we can begin discussing our own culture, the cultures of others, or the process of cross-cultural adaptation and interaction. The most important part of culture for a sojourner is that which is internal and hidden, but which governs the behavior they encounter. Knowledge of internal culture gives a framework for analyzing and interpreting behavior and customs both of others and of us. Cross-cultural training ought to help sojourners move from the overt and descriptive level to the analytical and interpretive.

Second, understand the dynamics of cross-cultural communication and adaptation. If the breakdown is one of the primary causes of culture shock, sojourners must understand the dynamics of interpersonal communication. The cybernetics model helps them conceptualize the process of communication and identify the basic parts and links in a face-to-face communication break down and anticipate reactions to it.

Third, the sequence of topics is very important. Training programs which move from the culture-general to the cultural-specific finesse the desire for cookbooks. In turn, sojourners are more likely to develop coping strategies and gain understanding rather than simply amassing questionable information. Culture-specific knowledge is important and should be available with as much depth and breadth as possible. But the mind-set

which aids cross-cultural adaptation best is one oriented toward interaction and process and focused on "us" rather than simply "them".

Fourth, use participatory or experiential exercises. The ultimate goal of training is that each sojourner assumes the responsibility of developing his or her own strategies for cross-cultural adjustment and communication. A trainer should provide the conceptual frameworks for understanding as well as the opportunities to apply them in a participatory manner. Experiential exercises can include contrast-culture games or other contrast-culture simulation exercises. The major goal of the exercises is not to enable the participants to fully understand another specific culture but rather to help them develop strategies for understanding any other culture they might encounter and to examine their reactions to the stresses of cross-cultural communication and interaction. Contrast-cultural models are especially useful because they are ambiguous and culture-general. For example, the famous Khan contrast-culture simulation involves rather open-ended scenarios in which Khan plays the role of a person who come from a culture and behaves in a way that is generally non-Western, associative, high-context, and relational.

China has reentered into the WTO. Intercultural communication between citizens of China and those of other nations will be greatly promoted in the future. As a result, it is inevitable that citizens of China encounter increasing incidents of culture shock in international tourism, trade, education and other fields. Meanwhile China is in urgent need of internalized talents to conform to the times. Cross-cultural competence has already been acknowledged as a must-have quality. In reality, most current intercultural courses applied in China remain on cognitive level, offering geographical, historical, and political backgrounds of alien cultures while ignoring practical day-to-day social skills training oriented to individuals. Although background information is important, we should also pay attention to the training of day-to-day social skills in alien cultures. This is another implication of current studies on culture shock. China's reentering into the world economy will prove the significance of the researches on culture shock as related to intercultural communicative competence and healthy intercultural communication.

4.2 Implications for Culture Teaching

Language and culture are closely related and can never be separated. Most features of culture are conveyed by language. English is the major course that is taken by students in China. Language is the basic tool in communication. So besides language skills, the cultural factors that are loaded should be emphasized. Just as Aizhen Liu (2001) points out that it is only after the students grasp the whole culture system, can they use language appropriately in communication under certain culture environment. It is reported that the target language

culture competence of college students in China is weaker than language competence, because the culture teaching has been inadequate from long before. Hymes (1972) stated that communication competence included both language competence and culture competence. So it is urgent to improve students' culture competence in China, so that they can manage the problems that can be met in communication with people from English-speaking countries.

As early as 1986, Indiana University in the United States designed "The Indiana guide to Proficiency-based Instructions" which included more than one hundred specific culture learning targets. Lafayette (1988) has a detailed description of this instruction. In 1999, China's "College English Syllabus" added a new teaching requirement--improving culture competence. The catalogue of cultural factors in college English includes two parts--the micro level (vocabulary, idioms and allusions, everyday speech act, nonverbal behavior) and the macro level (value, pragmatic principles, thinking patterns and ethnical psychological traits). We can see the positive aspect of this catalogue. However, those items are still culture specific. That is to say, its focus is still confined to the specific culture knowledge about English-speaking countries. According to the present studies on culture shock, culture-specific method and culture-general method should be combined. Attention should be paid to the enhancement of learners' ability in their cross-cultural communication and that in terms of cultural differences emphasis should be focused on the elevation of cultural awareness and on the cultivation of their sensitivity, tolerability and flexibility. This is another implication for college English teaching.

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