Cross-cultural transitions and wellness: Dealing with culture shock

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Abstract. Cross-cultural communication has emerged as a major concern for the helping professions in our multicultural society. Much has been written about recognizing the cultural biases inherent in all problem-solving and development models as well as improving communication between cultural groups. There are some situations, however, where culture itself is the problem rather than simply a communication obstacle to be overcome between client and worker. Counsellors may encounter persons who have been uprooted and transplanted, victims of culture shock, 'casualties of intercultural mobility' (Draguns, 1981, p. 11). This paper examines the unavoidable stress experienced when a person moving to a new culture finds that familiar cues from home are suddenly replaced with strange, ambiguous, and unpredictable cues in the new setting. A 'U-Curve' pattern of adjustment is offered as a conceptual framework for understanding the stressful period of adjustment in a new culture, and several predictor variables are advanced which may influence the degree of culture shock and recovery reported by individuals. The paper concludes with an overview of strategies for wellness, suggestions for promoting adjustment and learning in a new culture.

Culture

More than simply a set of customs, culture

constitutes a way fully characteristic of organizing life, of thinking and of conceiving the underlying postulates of the principal human institutions, of relating to and interacting with other intelligent human beings. It influences our way of experimenting with the universe, providing a combination of intermediate patterns which channel our feelings and thoughts, making us react in a particular way, different from those who have been submerged in different patterns (Gutierrez, 1973, p. 17).

A culture can be understood from this perspective as a network of shared meanings that are taken for granted as reality by those interacting within the network. This view of culture proposes that a community of people tend to construct a common model or map of the world derived from their shared experiences and then use these pre-determined categories as a background or setting against which incoming experiences are interpreted. Without such a model or map, people would experience the world as totally chaotic and unpredictable. In addition to traditional behaviours and customs, culture then includes a conceptual style which 'reflects more a manner of organizing things, of putting things in a certain way, of looking at the world in a distinct fashion' (Price-Williams, 1980, p. 157). People attempt to structure the outside world by matching external stimuli against internal conceptual patterns. When such a match is made, the person is able to give meaning to an outside event. If the match cannot be made, however, the person may feel disoriented, frustrated, or afraid. In order to survive and manage in our world, we must develop a useful set of expectations which allow us to interact with our social environment to meet our needs.

Vastly different patterns of experience over time will result in vastly different world views or background assumptions. People with different cultures will perceive the world differently because they have been 'selectively sensitized to certain arrays of stimuli rather than others as a function of membership in one cultural group rather than another' (Hallowell, 1951, p. 168). As long as a person is interacting with others who share the same world view, he or she may not consciously be aware of the particular patterns of meaning assumed. The shared reality is simply taken for granted. It is through contact with persons who see the world differently that an individual can become acutely aware of the cultural patterns he or she is using. Cross-cultural interaction poses the situation where assumption of reciprocal perspectives is no longer valid, where there is no concensus about reality, where the background expectancies are not shared. In this situation, a person may experience frustration and disorientation as predictions break down, incoming stimuli do not match familiar patterns, and actions are misinterpreted by others.

Moving across cultures

When people move to a new culture

they take with them the taken-for-granted meaning structure of their home culture. They continue to choose actions consistent with it, and to interpret their own and their host's actions in terms of it (Noesjirwan and Freestone, 1979, p. 190).

Conflicts related to the differences in rules, meanings, and values between the two cultures will be inevitable.

Several occupational groups have been studied with regard to their

adjustment patterns in new cultures: foreign scholars and students, business executives, technical assistants, Peace Corps volunteers, teachers, social workers and migrant workers. It is not surprising that anthropologists have also contributed to the literature on problems of cultural adjustment since culture constitutes a major focus of study in their discipline. There appears to be general agreement in this literature that a person entering a new culture will progress through a series of states as summarized in Table 1.

Some have proposed a further stage of 'Independence' (Adler, 1975) or 'Double-Giving' (Yoshikawa, 1988) wherein the person transcends the context of any one culture, but this appears to be more of an existential state beyond the scope of this discussion.

Culture shock and recovery

The initial phase of the acculturation process can be seen from Table 1 to be a negative experience, an emotional 'down', a decreased sense of well-being. This experience has been labelled as *Culture Shock* in the literature since the early 1950s when anthropologist Kalervo Oberg introduced the expression. Oberg depicted culture shock as a mental illness, an occupational pathology for persons transplanted abroad 'precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (1954, p. 1). Hall (1959) added the element of unfamiliar stimuli from the new environment in his description of culture shock as 'a removal or distortion of many of the familiar cues one encounters at home and the substitution for them of other cues which are strange' (p. 156). In addition to the change in cues, Adler's (1975) definition included the reaction of the individual:

Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning. and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences (p.13).

Kealey (1978) stressed this interaction between individual and environment:

it is not the new culture or environment itself that *CAUSES* the upset. Rather it is one-self in contact with the new environment that creates the physical/emotional upset (p. 48).

Ruben, Askling, and Kealey (1977) connected culture shock with adaptation or adjustment:

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Author	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Oberg 1954, 1960	Incubation	Crisis	Recovery	Full Recovery
Lysgaard 1955	Spectator	Crisis	Coming to Terms	Regained Adjustment
Smalley 1963	Fascination	Hostility/ Frustration	Adjustment	Biculturalism
Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963	Excitement	Disillusionment	Confusion	Positive Adjustment
Ex 1966	Uprooting	Frustration	Habituation	Restoration
Lifton 1969	Confrontation	Emptying	Reordering	Renewal
Rhinesmith and Hoopes 1970	Arrival	Unfreezing	Moving	Refreezing
Pfister-Ammende 1973	Transplantation	Uprooting	Resettlement	Adjustment
Curle 1973	Separation	Trauma/Shock	Reconnection	Adjustment
Richardson 1974	Elation	Depression	Recovery	Acculturation
Adler 1975	Contact	Disintegration	Reintegration	Autonomy
Klein 1977	Spectator	Stress	Coming to Terms	Decision
Kealey 1978	Exploration	Frustration	Coping	Adjustment
Harris and Moran 1979	Awareness	Rage	Introspection	Integration
Kohls 1979	Initial Europerie	Hostility	Gradual Adjustment	Adaptation
Hertz 1981	Euphoria Arrival	Impact	Rebound	Coping
Furnharn and Bochner 1982	Elation/ Optimism	Frustration	Confusion	Confidence/ Satisfaction
Zwingmann and Gunn 1983	Impact/ Uprooting	Loss	Recovery	Reaction
Berry 1985, 1985b	Honeymoon/ Contact	Conflict	Identity Crisis	Adaptations

Table 1. Stages of cultural adjustment

Culture shock focuses on the manner in which persons experience and cope with the cyclic psychological, physiological, and vocational fluctuations associated with the adjustment in the first months in a new environment (p. 91).

Spradley and Phillips (1972) observed that a dramatic change in cultural environment could be considered as a 'stressor' from the perspective of the stress model developed by Selye (1956). Culture shock then could be understood as a state of stress, 'the resultant tension or disequilibrium produced within the organism ... generally inferred from the presence of indicators known as stress responses' (Spradley and Phillips, 1972, p. 154). Other writers have supported this view of culture shock as a stress reaction derived from an inability to understand cultural cues (Argyle, 1988; Barnlund, 1988; Bennett, 1977; Berry, 1975; Berry and Annis, 1974; Dyal and Dyal, 1981; Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988; Harris and Moran, 1979; Locke and Feinsod, 1982; Taft, 1988).

Barna (1983) identifies specific factors from the stress research literature that have been established as primary stressors: 'ambiguity, lack of certainty, and unpredictability' and shows how these correspond directly with the experiences of a person who enters a new culture. Using Selve's General Adaptation Syndrome (1956), Barna describes the neuro-physical reactions to stress and concludes that such a stress reaction cannot be avoided in cross-cultural encounters. From their research on counselling European immigrants to Canada, Wyspianski and Fournier-Ruggles (1985) also assert that 'even the most prepared will encounter some degree of culture shock' (p. 226). Everyone who attempts to live and work in a strange culture can expect to experience culture shock during the first months but the subjective experience varies from person to person along dimensions of specific symptoms, intensity, and duration (Adler, 1975; Barna, 1983; Foster, 1973; Kealey, 1978; Kim, 1988; Locke and Feinsod, 1982; McRae, Vittitow, and Mipos, 1979; Seelye, 1984; Spradley and Phillips, 1972; Wyspianski and Fournier-Ruggles, 1985; Zapf, 1989).

The increase in well-being and confidence experienced in the latter stages of the cultural adjustment pattern (Table 1) commonly is labelled as recovery in the literature. During this period, 'the "strange" is reprogrammed into the "normal" so that the stress response will not occur' (Barna, 1983, p. 43). Ruben and Kealey (1979) present this Recovery period as a time of 'psychological adjustment'

the term we give to the general psychological well-being, self-satisfaction, contentment, comfort-with, and accommodation-to a new environment after the initial perturbations which characterize culture shock have passed (p. 21).

It will take time, according to Furnham (1988), 'to develop a new set of assumptions that help...to understand and predict the behaviour of others' (p. 46). Adler (1975) also described how over time the individual acquires understanding and coping skills appropriate to the new culture. Now 'experientially capable of moving in and out of new situations' (p. 17), the person experiences regained confidence and an increased sense of wellbeing. Having recovered from the negative stress of culture shock, he or she can relax defenses and participate within the new culture.

Two related terms, 'culture fatigue' and 'role shock' appear frequently in the literature on cultural adjustment and can be easily confused with culture shock. 'Culture fatigue' (Guthrie, 1975; Seelye, 1984; Szanton, 1966) refers to an exhaustion resulting from the constant small adjustments required to function in a foreign culture. Much less severe than a shock reaction, culture fatigue arises from the partial adjustment required of guests, travellers, visitors, people who are aware they will soon be returning to their home culture. 'Role shock' (Brislin and Pedersen, 1976; Byrnes, 1966; Harris and Moran, 1979; Higbee, 1969) is a stress reaction brought on by the discrepancy between the role one expects to play and the actual role requirements in a new culture. Performance requirements may be ambiguous; associated role-sets and status may be very different in the new setting. Certainly this is related to culture shock. In a dissertation comparing the symptoms of culture shock and role strain, Juarez (1972) concluded that they were 'manifestations of similar phenomena' (p. 258). Role shock appears to be an overwhelming role strain triggered by the move to a new culture. The term is usually applied to the occupational role and its effects related to effective work in the new setting. Role shock then can be considered a component of culture shock. The person moving to a new culture will experience the accumulated stress of ambiguous expectations in every aspect of living, not only the occupational role.

The U-curve

The duration of individual stages may vary from person to person but the overall process of adjustment in a new culture can be expected to last about a year (Foster, 1973: Ruben and Kealey, 1979). Lysgaard (1955) first observed that the sequence of adjustment over time could be generalized to a curvilinear trend, a U-shaped curve of well-being plotted against time. This pattern is commonly referred to in the literature as the 'U-Curve Hypothesis' and is illustrated in Figure 1.

Initial feelings of optimism and challenge give way to frustration and confusion as the person is unable to interact in a meaningful way in the new culture (Culture Shock). Resolution of these difficulties leads to a restoration of confidence and integration with the new culture (Recovery). Failure to achieve resolution could mean continuing frustration and a possible decision to leave. Some have extended the U-curve to a 'W-Curve Hypothesis' to include the post-return adjustment period when the person moves back into the home culture (Adler, 1981; Berry, 1985b; Bochner, Lin and McLeod, 1980; Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie and Yong, 1986; Brislin and VanBuren, 1974; Curle, 1973; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Hertz, 1981; Martin, 1984).

Accounts of persons moving across cultures have identified many indicators of culture shock including the following reported descriptors:

sense of loss	impatient	apathetic
confused	irritable	depressed
ready to cry	frustrated	withdrawn
isolated	thwarted	helpless
afraid	angry	vulnerable
exhausted	need to complain	inadequate
panic	desire to resign	overwhelmed
homesick	need to 'get out'	self-doubt
insomnia	resentful	bewildered
disoriented	contemptuous of clients	pessimistic
cynical	unable to concentrate	hopeless
physically ill	hostile	rejected
fatigued	distrusting	unaccepted
different	alienated	anxiety
lonely	disenchanted	suspicious

The negative aspect of these traits is emphasized when contrasted with the following positive characteristics reported at the time of entry and in the recovery state of the cultural adjustment process:

excitement	challenge	satisfaction
fascination	euphoria	elation
anticipation	enthusiasm	creative
intrigue	capable	expressive
confident	optimism	self-actualized
stimulation	acceptance	energetic
sense of discovery	self-assured	purposive

While most accounts of culture shock and recovery in the literature are descriptive, some have attempted to operationalize the experience through

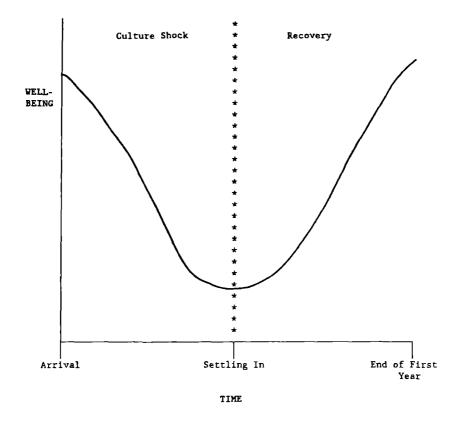


Figure 1. Generalized U-curve of adjustment to a new culture over time

scales based on self-reports of symptom intensity and duration (Calhoun, 1977; Kron, 1972; Ruben and Kealey, 1979; Zapf, 1989). Although usually composed of items identified as culture shock symptoms in the literature, the culture shock scales developed thus far must be acknowledged as general stress scales. There is always the possibility that the stress patterns picked up by these instruments were actually manifestations of some other process. It is defined rather than proven that scores on these scales are culture shock rather than stress related to some other process or event. Although the U-Curve Hypothesis has a strong conceptual base in the literature on cross-cultural adjustment, empirical support has been uneven. Among studies that have supported the U-Curve, curves have been 'dramatically different shape – some are flat, others tall and all are fairly irregular' (Furnham and Bochner, 1986, p. 132).

Strategies

As with many problems in living, the literature does a relatively thorough job defining the parameters and features of culture shock then focuses much less attention on suitable strategies for helping the victim. Much of what has been written addresses the assessment of adaptation potential of persons who will be moving to a new culture. Screening techniques and pre-departure programs are of limited use to the counsellor who tends to encounter those who are already in the throes of culture shock. Determining whether or not the client was a suitable candidate for the move in the first place will not help much at this point. The counsellor needs some alternatives, specific strategies for wellness. Following are some suggestions based on the literature.

Understanding of Culture Shock

As a first step, it may be useful for the client to become acquainted with culture shock as a common and unavoidable process. Many people move to a new setting with unrealistic expectations of the demands in the new culture and little awareness of their own limitations. The overwhelming confusion and frustration that are a part of culture shock may have been perceived as a severe personal problem, a weakness or mental health crisis of unknown origin. For the client to understand that the stress is natural, time-limited, and common to all sojourners can be therapeutic in itself. Reassuring the client that the difficulty is not just 'you' but rather 'you interacting in this strange place without your familiar cues and resources' can lead to increased hope and confidence. The client may then be free to begin dealing with the new culture in specific small steps, recognizing that the process will take some time.

Awareness of danger signs

It can be important for the client to become aware of signs that things are getting out of control, specific signals that it is again time to talk with someone. Kealey (1978, p. 53) identified several such signs:

- you are drinking more
- you are avoiding people
- you are subject to uncontrollable emotions
- you are spending all your time writing letters back home
- you are constantly complaining about the society
- you are adopting very negative attitudes towards the local people

- you constantly fear you are misunderstood by all, including your spouse
- you feel all alone
- you constantly think about things

Connections with local ethnic community

You may be able to encourage connections between your client and others of his or her culture who have already been through the culture shock experience in your area. The natural support systems of the local ethnic community can offer invaluable guidance and assistance to the new arrival. Kim (1988) elaborates on this liaison role of cultural middleman/woman and advocates 'the merging of ethnic and host team social service delivery' (p. 171).

Communication competence

Competence in the language of the host culture is stressed in the literature as very important for the adjustment process. Not being understood or taken seriously is one of the major stressors in a new culture. Unless the language minority is very large, the newcomer will need to learn and practice effective communication according to the language and rules of the new setting. While language acquisition is beyond the scope of most counselling relationships, there are some things you can do. The client may benefit from a referral to an appropriate language training program. You can encourage participation in encounters with members of the host communication skills and learn from feedback. Perhaps most important, you can make sure to provide frequent direct feedback in your own sessions. Here is a safe setting where the newcomer can get honest and immediate feedback without being defensive or feeling foolish.

Analysis of culture bumps

You can help the client to analyze specific situations of frustrated expectations in the new culture. This brings the focus down from the broad level of general culture shock to the nuts and bolts of actual incidents. Archer (1986) refers to these events as 'culture bumps' and proposes the following pattern for analysis:

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- 1. Pinpoint the specific time when you felt different or uncomfortable
- 2. Define the situation
- 3. List the behaviours of the other person(s)
- 4. List your own behaviour
- 5. List your feelings in the situation
- 6. List the behaviours you expect from people in your own culture in that same situation
- 7. Reflect on the underlying value in your culture that prompts that behaviour expectation.

It may ease the newcomer's sense of being overwhelmed if he or she can save up these 'culture bumps' to discuss with you in your next session.

Using groups

You may determine that a groupwork approach is the preferred method with clients experiencing culture shock. Most of the suggestions made thus far appear appropriate for group settings (awareness that others are experiencing similar stress; connections with local ethnic resources; communication practice with feedback; analysis of culture bumps). With a concentration on teaching culture shock victims the specific behaviour patterns they lack in the new setting, Furnham and Bochner (1986) make a strong case for developing Social Skills Training (SST) programs which

nearly all follow a similar sequence in their training. The first stage is a diagnosis or description of the verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are lacking in the clients, followed by exposure to models, role-playing with feedback, and often in-site training (p. 202).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that there are potential positive aspects to the stress model of cross-cultural transitions as presented in this paper. Appropriate and tolerable levels of stress can actually be a motivating force for learning and performance; the goal is to avoid overstress where the person stops learning and starts defending. Culture shock is only the frustrating or negative stage of a broader transition process that has the potential for tremendous personal growth through psychological adjustment and the discovery of new world views. The overall process of cultural transition has been described by Adler (1975) as a 'depth experience' that 'begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self' (p. 18). The key appears to be reduction of the debilitating effects of severe culture shock which can result in breakdown, withdrawal. or reluctance to interact in the new culture. This paper has put forward specific strategies for counsellors in this regard.

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