

Understanding and Challenging Culture Shock

Tamar SHIOSHVILI*

Abstract

In the last four decades culture shock has become an underlying part of the international travelers' vocabulary and is now frequently used to describe any physical or emotional discomfort experienced by those adjusting to a new environment. In the works on culture shock we single out three basic causes: (1) the loss of familiar cues, (2) the breakdown of interpersonal communication, (3) an identity crisis.

Coping strategies should be actions which could lead to self-control to respond to a situation. One is unable to change another culture, and the purpose of cross-cultural adaptation is not to avoid the people in the host culture, but to increase interaction with the local people. Another effective strategy is to learn something about the new culture before leaving home. It helps to predict reactions to stress. This information may help diminish negative stereotypes and give some confidence. The disposition to judge others in terms of one's own cultural expectations (ethnocentrism) is diminished if we have some predeparture, culture-specific knowledge.

Each of us can develop our own coping strategies. Like the cold, there is no tangible cure, but understanding the system provides us with a sense of control and helps us to work out some new cross-cultural skill.

Keywords: culture shock, cues, cross-cultural, adjustment, culture-specific

Introduction

One of many reasons for studying cross-cultural communication is to let us rise above our naive provincialism and achieve a more worldly and sophisticated cosmopolitanism; to gain tolerance and charity for all peoples and to widen our horizon. Besides this cause many educators give two other causes: job skills and interpersonal adjustment. While considering thus significant for the XXI century processes, from the scope of our interest, we shouldn't skip "culture shock" that in the last four decades has become an underlying part of the international travelers' vocabulary and is now frequently used to describe any physical or emotional discomfort experienced by those adjusting to a new environment.

We will try to make some observations on the causes of culture shock and coping with cross-cultural adjustment stress.

Anthropologist Kalvero Oberg was the first to use this term in 1960s cross-cultural literature, although it was devised by Cora Dubois in 1951. According to Oberg "it is an anxiety occurring to people transported abroad that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse". (Oberg, 1960)

While Oberg attaches the severe definition "ailment" to culture shock, some consider it a normal and natural growth or transition process as we adapt to another culture. (Adler, 1985)

Why Does Culture Shock Come About?

In the works on culture shock we single out three basic causes: (1) the loss of familiar cues, (2) the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and (3) an identity crisis. All three disorienting states occur in adjustment to any new social environment.

Loss of Cues or Reinforcers

Cues are physical and social indicators which direct us through our daily activities in an acceptable way which is harmonious with the total social environment. They may be words, gestures, facial expressions, postures or customs which help us make sense of the social world that surrounds us. They tell us when and how to give gifts or tips, when to be serious or to be humorous, how to speak to leaders and subordinates, who has status, what to say when we meet people, when and how to shake hands, how to eat, and so on. They make us feel comfortable.

Cues are supporters of behavior because they indicate

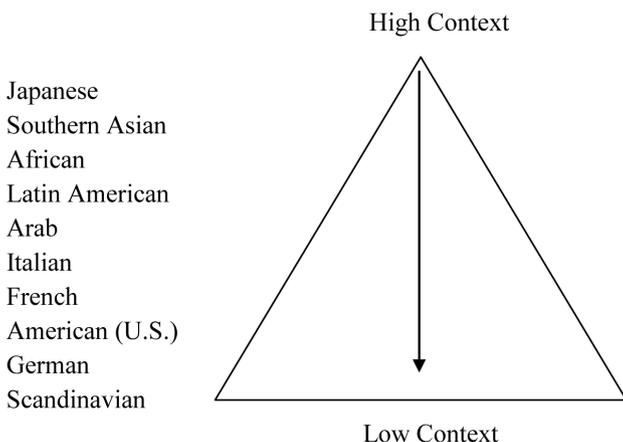
*Tamar Shioshvili is a Dean of the Faculties of Humanities and Education at International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. tshioshvili@yahoo.com

if things are being done inappropriately. In a new social environment, behavior is no longer definitely right or wrong, but instead becomes very vague. This ambiguity is especially painful for many Euro-Americans because they are accustomed to clear verbal messages and feedback, explicit rules of behavior, and the ability to predict the behavior of others. In many other cultures people may say yes when they mean maybe because they want to please, or they may say maybe when they mean no because they don't want to give negative feedback to another person. (Weaver, 1998)

The low-context, loosely integrated, and heterogeneous nature of Euro-American societies is built on clear, explicit rules of behavior which ensure predictability. (Hall, 1976)

In high-context, non-Western cultures, rules of behavior are often vague, implicit, and implicitly learned. They are buried deeply within the context of the culture. The society is usually more tightly integrated and homogenous. One can infer from his or her own behavior what is appropriate for everyone else. For Euro-Americans, on the other hand, there are fewer rules of behavior and they are less easily identified. Consequently, there is less predictability, when familiar cues are no longer derived by their behavior, they experience pain and disappointment.

High vs. Low Context Cultures



High Context

- Greater tolerance for ambiguity
- More emphasis on non-verbal; communication
- Responsibility based on agreement, not contract
- Implicit control
- Group Orientation
- Relative values
- Feelings and emotions

Low Context

- Greater need for precision
- More emphasis on verbal communication
- Responsibility based on contracts
- Explicit control
- Individual Orientation
- Absolute values
- Logic

As a matter of fact, the loss of a reinforcer or cue is a form of punishment in terms of their psychological reactions. (Azrin, 1970:103-107)

In a new culture, our messages of “good morning”, “thank you”, “how are you”, no longer bring the response we are used to in our native culture. It is not even clear when one should smile or laugh. This is exactly what we (lecturers of different universities from different republics of the Soviet Union), were exposed to, while covering four-month, high level “English Skills and Methodology” program, specially organized for overseas associate professors by the government of Great Britain Leeds university, UK in 1984. The first month and a half was completely dedicated to the introduction of “survival Skills”, that is so important when you get into a new culture. Primarily we were reminded to smile while meeting people at the university or in the streets of Leeds, so habitual for Europeans and not for Soviets. Survival Skills involved such points as: joining in/Interrupting.

Interacting In Conversation/Discussion

1. Joining in/Interrupting

If you wish to join in a discussion, you must:

- 1.1. SIGNAL that you wish to do so;
- 1.2. RECOGNISE acceptance/rejection of your attempt;
- 1.3. MAKE your point.

Examples:

(Excuse me.)	May	I come in here?
	I just	comment on that?
	Can	I add something?

[USUALLY BODY LANGUAGE]

I'd like to point out that

I'd just like to say that

[NOTE: It is probably true to say that, the more heated the discussion, the more important the body language and less important the verbal signals]

2. Holding on/ Excluding others

Perhaps you want to

2.1. SHOW that you have not finished your point;

Perhaps you want to

2.2. POSITIVELY EXCLUDE someone who is trying to interrupt you.

Examples:

Just a moment ...

Hang on a minute ...

Hold on a little (telephone)

Sorry, could I just finish what I'm saying?

Trying to say?

Yes, just let me make my point.

The simple behaviors that we have used to interact with others no longer bring about reinforcers (supporters) we have received throughout our lives. The reaction is often frustration and anger which is unreasonably shifted onto others whom we perceive to be lower in our social hierarchy, such as taxi drivers, waiters, porters, and secretaries.

Cues also involve how we use time and space. (Hall, 1976) They include rhythm or synchrony of speech and movement which we acquire during the first few weeks of life and the social distance we maintain between ourselves and others. This is what was envisaged when telephone skills were included in survival skills material at Leeds University, conducting practical calling actively to the British Directory Enquiries right at the lecture, e.g.:

Telephoning

A: Directory Enquiries, which town please?

B: Hello, excuse me, I wonder if you could tell me the telephone code of the city in republic of Georgia that is Tbilisi.

A: To be where?

B: In republic of Georgia. Tbilisi.

A: Georgia?

B: Yes.

A: What's ... what's the town called?

B: TBI-LI-SI.

A: Can you spell it?

Even if your conversation was on the surface successful, it is nevertheless important to remember that THE OTHER PERSON on the phone must feel sure that success has been achieved. Look:

A: Abbey House Museum.

B: Hello, excuse me, I wonder if you could tell me your opening hours?

A: Yes, between ten o'clock and six o'clock and then on Sunday two o'clock while six o'clock.

B: thank you.

A: Every day While six

B: Thank you. (ENDS)

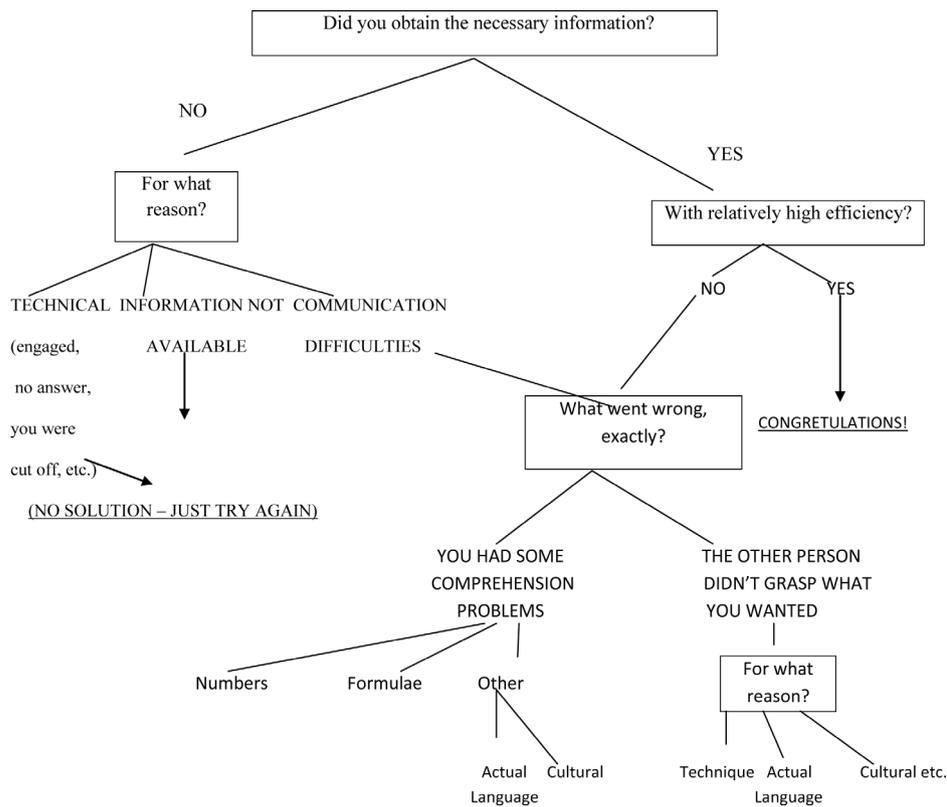
Telephone Skills: Report-Back on Record Conversations

I, myself had an irritating experience with Washington D.C. Airport inquiry office, after losing luggage upon arrival. During eight days I had to accomplish torturous three or four hour daily attempts to get in touch with a human being through the automatized responding system, to put me through a luggage reclaim officer to remind about my luggage loss and ask to reinforce finding operations. The human being contacts you once in a blue moon, what rouses anger and frustration. Georgian information offices are less advanced to have fully atomized network, so that you can easily irrupt your anger on human beings.

By the way, we agree with Nathan Azzin, who says you may feel better because you have vented anger over the loss of the reinforcer. (Azzin, 1970: 103-107) Another disorienting state occurring in adjustment to any new social environment is the breakdown of interpersonal communication, which causes frustration. In this process one can easily identify the breakdown of verbal messages (involving different languages), whereas the breakdown of nonverbal messages is less obvious but more significant, as we feel emotionally confused and cut off from others. Feedback involves both verbal and non-verbal messages and varies with each culture. In many non-Western cultures, feed-back is devious, indirect and subtle, whereas Americans prefer direct and unambiguous feedback.

One more explanation of culture shock is identity crisis. The loss of cues or reinforcers is disorienting, but the disorientation frees people from habitual ways of doing and perceiving things and allows them to recognize and adapt new cues. We may consider that our culture determines what information gets into our heads and how we use that information to solve problems, so, in connection with that culture is likened to mind. This culture "program" in turn determines our behavior. To understand someone's behavior, it is necessary to understand how the person experiences or perceives the world, and how that person has learned to organize information.

When we enter another culture, we are overwhelmed by stimuli and demands and must temporarily experience the sense of perplexity of not knowing what to pay attention to or how to solve problems. This period may be similar to the transitional stages we experience during other life



Telephone Skills: Report-Back on Record Conversations

crises such as adolescence, the ways in which we select out that which is appropriate or abstract from our social and physical environment, that which is significant, or obsolete.

The transitional period is very relational in that everything seems to flow together somewhat chaotically. (Weaver, 1975, 377-380) However, this is how we begin to see new relationships and new ways of ordering our perceptual and intellectual world. We are expanding our cultural program, image system, and subjective knowledge structure.

Coping with cross-cultural adjustment stress

Various reactions to the stress of cross-cultural adjustment are related to defense mechanisms, we take to protect our ego or self from a hurting reality. Most neurotics have a sense of hopelessness, and lack of control. They are victims of a situation that they cannot realistically change; they are controlled by their unconscious reacting. There is no doubt, many neurotics fully understand the cause of their neurosis but they are still neurotic. The first step to overcome a neurosis is, probably, understanding, but later each person must develop a sense of control over his or her reactions and must cope with a hurting reality which cannot be changed.

Understanding of the process of adaptation and the

expectation that culture shock will occur removes a substantial portion of pain caused by uncertainty and lack of predictability. It relieves it, if we know that our reactions are part of the process of adjustment to the reality of another culture which we cannot change. However, this knowledge is not enough. We can take rational steps which will allow us to control our reactions and minimize the harshness of the stress. These coping mechanisms permit travelers instead of reacting to the new culture, to face reality and determine what to do about it and to find different ways of dealing with the adjustment problems.

First of all, it's important to differentiate between coping and defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are unconscious reactions to a stressful reality. The situations take over the individual by causing the reactions. These defenses help one to evade painful reality through denial, withdrawal. They are normal, but ineffective ways of dealing with the stress.

Coping strategies should be actions, not reactions which could lead to self-control to respond to a situation. One is unable to change another culture, and the purpose of cross-cultural adaptation is not to avoid the source of stress (people in the host culture), but to increase interaction with the local people.

If withdrawing from others eventually is maladaptive, increased communication with host nationals is eventually adaptive. Temporarily this may practically increase stress

because host nationals are stressors. (Walton, 1990: 507-527) But finally it will accelerate the process of adjustment. Adopting the verbal and nonverbal language in the context of the culture and intentionally placing oneself in situations where there is greater possibility of interacting with host nationals are coping strategies which lead towards increased cross-cultural understanding that will promote cross-cultural communication skills.

In researching the process of cross-cultural adjustment with Turkish students who study at the International Black Sea University, it was found that most identified evident U-curve pattern with an initial high period followed by a sharp emotional downturn. Almost all came out of the slump with an emotional upswing, as they adjusted to Georgian culture. When asked what event seemed to be most responsible for the upturn, 73% responded that they had developed friendship with a host national. Interpersonal communication with host national friends seemed to change the tide.

When people go through culture shock, they often feel personal weakness or inadequacy which holds back their adjustment. To overcome this sense of personal inadequacy, it is also beneficial to associate with those who have experienced culture shock before and can assure the newly-arrived that it is both normal and transitional. They may offer strategies to overcome the stress and successfully adapt. Caution must be taken that this association with other sojourners not be exclusively conational. Otherwise, it may lead to avoidance of host nationals and hinder successful adjustment.

Another effective strategy, we think, is to learn something about the new culture before leaving home. It helps to predict reactions to stress, as well as it helps to have some knowledge of the new culture before departure. It's quite easy to get information on history, geography, food, customs, dress, language, and religion before leaving. This information may help diminish negative stereotypes and give one some confidence.

This culture specific knowledge also provides conversational presentation. It helps travelers coming to the U.S. if they already know something of American sports, politics, history, etc. They then have topics for a conversation with almost any American.

This culture-specific knowledge also communicates to host nationals that you care enough about them to gather the information.

While no detailed advice about another culture can be gathered, we can acquire a set of basic do's and don'ts which at least help us avoid offensive behavior and give us conviction that we can at least greet people properly, know when and how to tip, avoid gestures that will be interpreted as rude, and eat in a manner that does not upset everyone else present.

The disposition to judge others in terms of one's own

cultural expectations (ethnocentrism) is diminished if we have some predeparture, culture-specific knowledge. We are more likely to understand the behavior of our hosts concerning their cultural experiences, we can at least become less ethnocentric.

One must be vigilant when gathering culture-specific, predeparture information. It can never be full or accurate in every situation. Even worse, it may predispose you to have expectations which are not met. The outcome is that some people, after they arrive in country, may take contrary pleasure in selecting out that which contradicts what they learned before coming. This perversion and selective attention may suppress successful adjustment and true understanding of the culture.

Conclusion

In the end, we can say, that each of us will develop our own collection of coping strategies. We can manage culture shock. Like the cold, there is no tangible cure or avoidance, but understanding the system provides us with a sense of control and forecasting and helps us to work out some new cross-cultural skill.

References

- Adler, N.J. (1985). *International Dimensions of Organization Behavior*, Cambridge, M. A. Kent
- Azrin, N. (1970). Pain and Aggression, in N.T. Adler, ed., *Readings in Experimental Psychology Today* (Del Mar, CA: CRM Books): 103-107.
- Azzin, N. (1970). Pain and Aggression, in N.T. Adler, ed., *Readings in Experimental Psychology Today* (Del Mar, CA: CRM Books):103-107
- Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday): *The Hidden Dimensions*, New York: Doubleday, 1966; *The Silent Language*, (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
- Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*, New York: Double-day
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments, *Practical Anthropology* 7, 177-182
- Walton, S. (1990). Stress Management Framing for overseas Effectiveness, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 14 (4), 507-527
- Weaver, G. (1975). American Identity Movements: A Cross-cultural confrontation, *Intellect* (March): 377-380
- Weaver, G.R. (1998). Understanding and Coping with Cross-Cultural Adjustment Stress, *Readings in Intercultural Relations*, U.S.A., 188