

Culture Shock & The Problem Of Adjustment To New Cultural Environments

(An editorial by Dr. Lalervo Oberg; Anthropologist; Health, Welfare and Housing Division; United States Operations Mission to Brazil)

I would like to make a few remarks about *culture shock*, a malady, which afflicts most of us to some degree. We might almost call culture shock an occupational disease of many people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad.

Customs, Cues, Norms

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs are the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not.

These cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which are unconsciously learned.

When an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props have been knocked from under him. This is followed by a feeling of frustration and anxiety. People react to the frustration in much the same way. First they reject the environment which causes the discomfort: "the ways of the host country are bad because they make us feel bad."

For example Americans who are in a strange land get together to grouse about the host country and its people, you can be sure they are suffering from culture shock.

Another phase of culture shock is regression. The home environment suddenly assumes a tremendous importance, everything becomes irrationally glorified. All difficulties and problems are forgotten and only the good things back home are remembered. It usually takes a trip home to bring one back to reality.

Symptoms

Some of the symptoms of culture shock are: excessive concern over cleanliness and the feeling that what is new and strange is "dirty." This could be in relation to drinking water, food, dishes, and bedding; fear of physical contact with attendants or servants; a feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one's own nationality; irritation over delays and other minor frustrations out of proportion to their causes; delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country; excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured; great concern over minor pains and irritations of the skin; and finally, that terrible longing to be back home, to be in familiar surroundings, to visit one's relatives, and, in general, to talk to people who really "make sense."

Individuals differ greatly in the degree in which culture shock affects them. Although not common, there are individuals who cannot live in foreign countries. Those who have seen people go through a serious case of culture shock and on to a satisfactory adjustment can discern steps in the process.

The Honeymoon Stage

During the first few weeks most individuals are fascinated by the new. They stay in hotels and associate with nationals who speak their language and are polite and gracious to foreigners. This honeymoon stage may last from a few days or weeks to six months depending on circumstances. If one is a very important person he or she will be taken to the show places, pampered and petted, and in a press interview will speak glowingly about progress, goodwill, and international amity. If he returns home may well write a book about his pleasant if superficial experience abroad.

But this "Cook's tour" type of mentality does not normally last if the foreign visitor remains abroad and has to seriously cope with real conditions of life. It is then that the second stage begins, characterized by a hostile and aggressive attitude towards the host country. This hostility evidently grows out of the genuine difficulty which the visitor experiences in the process of adjustment. There is

maid trouble, school trouble, language trouble, house trouble, transportation trouble, shopping trouble, and the fact that people in the host country are largely indifferent to all these troubles. They help but they just don't understand your great concern over these difficulties. Therefore, they must be insensitive and unsympathetic to you and your worries. The result, "I just don't like them." You become aggressive, you band together with your fellow countrymen and criticize the host country, its ways and its people.

This criticism is not an objective appraisal but a derogatory one. Instead of trying to account for conditions as they are through an honest analysis of the actual conditions and the historical circumstances which have created them, you talk as if the difficulties you experience are more or less created by the people of the host country for your special discomfort. You take refuge in the company of your countrymen and this cocktail circuit becomes the fountainhead of emotionally charged labels known as stereotypes. This is a peculiar kind of shorthand which caricatures the host country and its people in a negative manner.

Stereotypes

The "dollar grasping American" and the "indolent Latin American" are samples of mild forms of stereotypes. The use of stereotypes may salve the ego of someone with a severe case of culture shock but it certainly does not lead to any genuine understanding of the host country and its people. This second stage of culture shock is in a sense a crisis in the disease. If you overcome it you stay, if not, you leave before you reach the stage of a nervous breakdown.

Culture shock is lessened as the visitor succeeds in getting some knowledge of the language and begins to get around by himself. This is the beginning of his adjustment to the new cultural environment. The visitor still has difficulties but he takes a "this is my cross and I have to bear it" attitude. Usually in this stage the visitor takes a superior attitude toward people of the host country. His sense of humor begins to exert itself. Instead of criticizing he makes jokes about the people and even cracks jokes about his or her own difficulties. He or she is now on the way to recovery. And there is still the poor devil who is worse off than yourself whom you can help, which in turn gives you confidence in your ability to speak and get around.