

Culture Shock – The Final adjustment

In the final stage of adjustment the visitor accepts the customs of the country as just another way of living. He can operate within the new milieu without a feeling of anxiety although there are moments of strain. Only with a complete grasp of all the cues of social intercourse will this strain disappear.

For a long time the individual will understand what the national is saying, but he is not always sure what the national means. With a complete adjustment you not only accept the foods, drinks, habits, and customs but actually begin to enjoy them. When you go back home on leave you may even take things back with you and if you leave for good you generally miss the country and the people to whom you have become accustomed.

It might be well to point out that the difficulties that the newcomer experiences are very real. If individuals come to a tropical area from a temperate one they quite often suffer from intestinal disturbances. Strange foods sometimes upset people. In Rio, for instance, water and power shortages are very real. When these physical difficulties are added to those arising from not knowing how to communicate and the uncertainties presented by customs the consequent frustrations and anxieties are understandable.

In the course of time, an individual makes this adjustment. You do what is essential about water, food, and the other minutiae of daily life. You adapt yourself to water and power shortages and to traffic problems. In short, the environment does not change. What has changed is your attitude towards it. Somehow it no longer troubles you; you no longer project your discomforts onto the people of the host country and their ways. You get along under a new set of living conditions.

Your attitude

Another important point worth considering is the attitude of others to a person suffering from culture shock. If you are frustrated and have an aggressive attitude to the people of the host country, they will sense this hostility and in many cases respond in either a hostile manner or try to avoid you. In other words, their response moves from a preliminary phase of ingratiation to aggressive ridicule and on to avoidance.

To your own countrymen who are well adjusted you become somewhat of a problem. As you feel weak in the face of the host country people you

tend to wish to increase your dependence on your fellow countrymen much more than is normal. Some will try to help you, whilst others will try to avoid you.

The better your fellow countryman understands your condition the better he is able to help you. But the difficulty is that culture shock has not been studied carefully enough for people to help you in an organized manner and you continue to be considered a bit queer - until you adjust yourself to the new situation.

Although I am not certain, I think culture shock affects wives more than husbands. The husband has his professional duties to occupy him and his activities may not differ too much from what he has been accustomed to. The wife, on the other hand, has to operate in an environment that differs much more from the milieu in which she grew up.

A product of history

In an effort to get over culture shock, I think there is value in knowing something about the nature of culture and its relationship to the individual. In addition to living in a physical environment, an individual lives in a cultural environment consisting of manmade physical objects, social institutions, and ideas and beliefs.

An individual is not born with culture but only with the capacity to learn it and use it. There is nothing in a new-born child which dictates that it should eventually speak Portuguese, English, or French, nor that he eat with a fork in his left hand rather than in the right, or use chop sticks. All these things the child has to learn. Nor are the parents responsible for the culture that they transmit to their young. The culture of any people is the product of history and is built up over time largely through processes that are, as far as the individual is concerned, beyond his awareness. It is by means of culture that the young learn to adapt themselves to the physical environment and to the people with whom they associate.

As we know, children and adolescents often experience difficulties in this process of learning and adjustment. But once learned, culture becomes a way of life, the sure, familiar, largely automatic way of getting what you want from your environment and as such it also becomes a value.

People have a way of accepting their culture as both the best and the only way of doing things. This is perfectly normal and understandable. To this attitude we give the name *ethnocentrism*, a belief that not only the culture but the race and

nation form the center of the world.

Individuals identify themselves with their own group and its ways to the extent that any critical comment is taken as an affront to the individual as well as to the group. If you criticize my country, you are criticizing me. If you criticize me, you are criticizing my country.

Along with this attitude goes the tendency to attribute all individual peculiarities as national characteristics. For instance, if an American does something odd or antisocial in a foreign country which back home would be considered a purely individual act, it is now considered a national trait.

Instead of being censured as an individual, his country is censured. It is best to recognize that ethnocentrism is a characteristic of national groups. If a national criticizes some aspect of his own culture, the foreigner should listen but not enter into the criticism.

The study of culture

Specific cultures are products of historical development. Brazil and the United States, for instance, have different cultural origins and different culture histories that account for present day differences.

In this case, however, the differences are not great, both cultures being parts of Western civilization. It might be useful to recognize here that the study of culture per se is not the study of individuals. Psychology is the study of individual personality. Sociology is the study of groups and group behaviors.

The student of culture studies not human individuals but the interrelationships of culture forms like technologies, institutions, idea and belief systems. He is interested not so much in the study of culture as such, but its impact upon the individual under special conditions.

Common elements

Any modern nation is a complex society with corresponding variations in culture. In composition it is made up of different ethnic groups, it is stratified into classes, it is differentiated into regions, it is separated into rural and urban settlements, each having its own distinctive cultural characteristics. Yet superimposed upon these differences are the common elements of official language, institutions, and customs that knit it together to form a nation.

These facts indicate that it is not a simple matter to acquaint oneself with the culture of a nation. Similarly the culture of one's own nation is complex. It too, differs by region and class.

Americans, for instance, who go abroad in various governmental and business capacities, are usually members of the middle class and carry the values and aspirations of this class, some of which are an accent on the practical or utilitarian - work as a means to personal success, and suspicion of personal authority.

Accustomed to working in large hierarchical institutions like business corporations, governmental agencies, or scientific foundations that have a life of their own and persist in time, Americans tend to become impersonal. Individuals no matter how able are replaceable parts in these large institutions.

A lack of understanding

An objective treatment of your cultural background and that of your new environment is important in understanding culture shock. There is a great difference in knowing what is the cause of your disturbance and not knowing.

Once you realize that your trouble is due to your own lack of understanding of other people's cultural background and your own lack of the means of communication rather than the hostility of an alien environment, you also realize that you yourself can gain this understanding and these means of communication. And the sooner you do this, the sooner culture shock will disappear.

The question now arises, what can you do to get over culture shock as quickly as possible? The answer is to get to know the people of that host country. But this you cannot do with any success without knowing the language, for language is the principal symbol system of communication.

We all know that learning a new language is difficult, particularly to adults. This task alone is quite enough to cause frustration and anxiety, no matter how skillful the language teacher.

But once you begin to be able to carry on a friendly conversation with your maid, your neighbor, or to go on shopping trips alone, you not only gain confidence and a feeling of power but a whole new world of cultural meanings open up for you. You begin to find out not only what and how people do things but also what their interests are.

These interests people usually express by what they habitually talk about and how they allocate their time and money. Once you know this value or interest pattern it will be quite easy to get people to talk and to be interested in you. When we say people have no interests we usually admit the fact that we have not bothered to find out.

At times it is helpful to be a participant observer by joining the activities of the people. This could be a carnival, a religious rite, or some economic activity. Yet the visitor should never forget that he or she is an outsider and will be treated as such. He should view this participation as role playing.

Understanding the ways of the people is essential but this does not mean that you have to give up on your own. What happens is that you have developed two patterns of behavior.

The source of pain

Finally a word on what your fellow countrymen can do to help you get over culture shock. Persons suffering from culture shock feel weak in the face of conditions that appear insufferable and it is natural for them to try to lean heavily on their compatriots.

This may be irritating to the long-term resident, but he should be patient, sympathetic, and understanding. Although talking does not remove pain, a great deal is gained by having the source explained.

Some of the steps toward a cure have been indicated. With patience and understanding, we can be reasonably sure that time, the great healer, will soon set things right.