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Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective

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One of the difficulties in considering culture shock is the tendency to treat it as an exotic ailment with origins rooted in far-away places. In fact, culture shock bears a remarkable resemblance to the tensions and anxieties we face whenever change threatens the stability of our lives. Alvin Toffler has described the phenomenon of disruptive change within a culture as "future shock."¹ Gail Sheehy has focused on the painful crises in individual life cycles, what we might term "passage shock."² These and other forms of "shock" (including culture shock) might be subsumed under the general category *transition shock*. This article will relate various concepts of culture shock to the general category of transition shock and will suggest how this frame of reference is useful in understanding the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms of culture shock.

The expression *culture shock* was popularized by Kalvero Oberg to refer to the "anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse."³ Edward T. Hall suggested the added dimension of replacement of familiar cues with new, strange elements.⁴ According to Peter S. Adler, "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 misun-

derstanding of new and diverse experiences."⁵ LaRay M. Barna broadens the concept to include physiological aspects. She defines culture shock as "the emotional and physiological reaction of high activation that is brought about by sudden immersion in a new and different culture."⁶

I would like to go one step further and suggest that culture shock is in itself only a subcategory of transition experiences. All such experiences involve loss and change: the loss of a partner in death or divorce; change of lifestyle related to "passages"; loss of a familiar frame of reference in an intercultural encounter; or reshaping of values associated with rapid social innovation. The reaction to loss and change is frequently "shocking" in terms of grief, disorientation, and the necessity for adjustment. According to Peter Marris,

a similar process of adjustment should work itself out whenever the familiar pattern of life has been disrupted. For once the predictability of events has been invalidated—whether from the collapse of the internal structure of purpose or of our ability to comprehend the environment—life will be unmanageable until the continuity of meaning can be restored, through a process of abstraction and redefinition.... Even changes which we scarcely think to involve loss may be analyzable in similar terms.⁷

Our adaptive processes fail to meet the needs of the moment, and we find ourselves overwhelmed by the stimuli we are forced to assimilate. Therefore, if transition shock is a state of loss and disorientation precipitated by a change in one's familiar environment that requires adjustment, then culture shock may be characterized as transition shock in the context of an alien cultural frame of reference. This experience may be linked to visiting another country, or it can occur within a subculture of one's home country.

The important factor is that culture shock, as a subcategory of transition experiences, is more recognizable, more understandable, even more tolerable, when viewed in the light of previous life experiences. We each have had some experience with the elements of culture shock. Perhaps we have not experienced all the elements, or possibly not in exactly the same form, but the similarities may provide us with confidence that we are not entirely without resources. We have all experienced life change before, if only in the form of change of residence, marriage, di-

vorce, new employment, and so on. The mere idea that culture shock is not an alien feeling can give us the confidence that we have the ability to adapt to it comfortably.

Symptoms

Transition shock, though quite common, appears to elicit different responses from different people in different places at different times. The symptoms vary from case to case, as the virtual infinity of variables interacts to create an individualized impact. Time and space, place and person each create a unique chemistry and a personalized reaction. Some of the symptoms suggested by various authors (Kalvero Öberg,⁸ Robert J. Foster,⁹ Peter S. Adler¹⁰) include: excessive concern over cleanliness and health; feelings of helplessness and withdrawal; irritability; fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured; a glazed stare; desire for home and old friends; and physiological stress reactions. We are essentially in a state of frustration, anxiety, and paranoia induced by the unfamiliar environment in which we find ourselves. Marris neatly describes this state of ambiguity inherent in transition experiences

as the need to reestablish continuity, to work out an interpretation of oneself and the world which preserves, despite estrangement, the thread of meaning; the ambivalence of this task as it swings between conflicting impulses; the need to articulate the stages of its resolution; and the risk of lasting disintegration if the process is not worked out.¹¹

Transition shock often leads to communication problems as well. When we are anxious, lonely, and disoriented, our communication skills degenerate. Isolation and tension are exacerbated, producing barriers and defensive communication. In the intercultural context, disorientation is particularly lethal, for it only serves to further isolate us from our environment. We block out the new forms and styles of communication available to us in order to preserve the old. Culture shock is thus a major obstruction in intercultural communication.

Responses

Frequently, as a reaction to such change, culture shock takes the form of psychic withdrawal. One of the nearly universal aspects of transition experiences is *cognitive inconsistency*: what was once

a coherent, internally consistent set of beliefs and values is suddenly overturned by exterior change. One of those values, self-preservation (or psychological stability), is called into serious question unless an alteration is made in our entire value system. Transition shock—and culture shock—may be viewed as defense mechanisms in reaction to cognitive inconsistency. If, as Dean Barnlund suggests, people become defensive when they perceive a threat to their worldview, then what greater situation of threat exists than immersion in an alien culture?¹² Barnlund describes the increasing level of stress which results as the threat to worldview increases: "As the perceived threat increases, they narrow their vision, resist certain kinds of information, distort details to fit their own biases, even manufacture evidence to bolster their preconceptions. The old, whether appropriate or not, is favored over the new. Anxiety is aroused when [people]...confront perceptions that are beyond [their] capacity to assimilate."¹³

This threat may be perceived as a case of cognitive inconsistency. We arrive overseas with a well-established hierarchy of assumptions, values, and beliefs. The chances are excellent that we will be in an environment where things may look familiar, but they don't operate in familiar ways. Indeed, perhaps nothing will even look familiar! In either case, worldview, including our view of ourselves, is assailed by verbal, nonverbal, physical, and psychological stimuli. If we cling to our own worldview, we may experience an untenable state of cognitive inconsistency: "Either they're crazy, or I am!" At the same time, we value our old belief system as well as adaptation to the new; we seek a way to survive within our former worldview yet recognize the necessity for a new perspective. Often two very contradictory systems vie for equal time. All we have held sacred is reflected in a distorting mirror, and the image flashed back throws us off balance, a sort of cultural fun house where previous orientations contribute little or nothing to the survival of the psyche.

We all depend to a certain extent on the norms of our environment, norms which we have cultivated carefully in our socialization process. In another culture that careful cultivation goes to seed and the neat systems of categories with which we have arranged our lives go askew. Dissonance is exacerbated by the loss of familiar cues and distortion of seemingly familiar responses. Previously high expectations of exotic overseas life have gradually been crushed, causing us to question the wisdom of our decision to embark on this adventure. In short, all that we once held as true is called into question, and daily life becomes

an endless attempt to achieve balance in this incongruous world. Our first reaction is to fight for the survival of our worldview and to rescue it by reaching for our defenses. But the only defenses we have are those from our own culture, defenses which are rarely helpful in the new culture. Our sense of alienation increases as our defense mechanisms drive us further from understanding the culture. The old frame of reference doesn't help in the least, but it's all we have, so we protect it furiously. Perhaps in doing so, we prolong culture shock and delay the acquisition of a new frame of reference.

It is important to note here that it is not merely the loss of the frame of reference that causes culture shock, but the defensiveness that such a loss engenders. Not knowing what to do is difficult enough, but, not being *able* to do what one has come to value doing is even more challenging. Recognition of the inappropriateness of our responses arouses tremendous inconsistency; we choose to deal with this dissonance by defending our familiar worldview, and we find ourselves deep in the throes of culture shock.

Stages

If we can overcome the tremendous desire to flee this discomfort, we may recognize several stages which may be familiar from other transition experiences that we have survived. A number of authors deal with various phases in transition shock; here we will employ the U.S. Navy's presentation of Clyde Sergeant's model, which suggests four phases of the psychological aspects of environmental adjustment: fight, flight, filter, and flex.¹⁴ During an exploratory phase in which the initial impact of immersing ourselves in another culture occurs, we recognize that our worldview is dissonant in a new culture. We proceed from early enthusiasm and high expectations to a *fight* stance, where self-protective mechanisms are engaged. Moving from the exploratory to the crisis phase, we become discouraged, bewildered, withdrawn, and may choose *flight* as the most effective defense mechanism available. During the recovery and adjustment phase, we resolve our incongruous perspectives, lower our defenses, and absorb new stimuli (*filter*). Finally, we reach the accommodation phase, where we give up defending our worldview and *flex* in our perspective on the new environment.

This particular *flex* does not imply a surrender of worldview; rather, it suggests a variety of adaptations which may be employed to reduce dissonance in the new culture. Taft's research

in this area identifies three varieties of adaptation, as discussed by Juris Draguns.¹⁵ The monistic adaptation will lead us to either "go native" and submerge ourselves in the host culture or cause us to retreat to the safety of people from our own country who are in residence. If we choose the pluralistic adaptation, we will both maintain our own culture and assimilate the host culture, becoming bicultural. Using the interactionist adaptation, we choose portions of both cultures and become a mixture of each.

Resolutions

The flex response is based on several personality characteristics that aid us in resolving conflicts more quickly and comfortably in our new environment. These characteristics include self-awareness, nonevaluativeness, cognitive complexity, and cultural empathy. During any transition experience, the quandary is frequently "Who am I?" The loss of continuity in one's purpose and direction must be reestablished to overcome the resulting sense of alienation. The individual who is most likely to master this situation is the one who has a firm sense of self-identity. Draguns notes, "To the degree that one's identity is crystallized and independent, many jolts from the encounters with a new, confusing social reality can be absorbed."¹⁶

In the culture shock experience, we must be very attuned to our own cultural values and beliefs so that the contrast culture is more understandable. If we recognize our own assumptions, then the elements of the new environment stand out in clear relief for us to examine. As Barna suggests, "[If you] become secure in your own identity...there is little chance for serious loss of self-esteem and more freedom for open investigation."¹⁷

However, I would suggest that a strong sense of identity can also be a hindrance, especially if we are inflexible and become threatened too quickly by conflicting stimuli. Awareness of our own culture needs to be complemented by a nonjudgmental stance in which we can easily separate what we see from our interpretation and evaluation of that event. If we enter each interaction in the host culture with evaluation as our first choice of communicative style, our culture shock will be maximal. Among the first skills we need to develop are the abilities to withhold evaluation, to refrain from cultural absolutism, and to accept rather than reject. As Conrad Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff describe,

The newcomer purposefully pushes ahead and bends all efforts to understand the other system.

The new ways will become familiar and even comfortable only by coming back to them again and again, seeking understanding without applying the values of one's own culture.¹⁸

This nonevaluative characteristic is a prerequisite for the development of cultural empathy. Empathy may be defined as "the use of imagination to intellectually and emotionally participate in an alien experience."¹⁹ Often people discuss empathy in terms of "putting yourself in the other person's shoes." But such a simple shift in position without an equal shift in personal perspective merely elicits a sympathetic response. From such a view, we know how we would feel in the situation, but not how the other person feels. To achieve an empathic response, we must not only step into the other person's shoes, but we must imaginatively participate in the other's worldview. We must not only shift our *position* but also our *perspective* on the event. This is an essential difference in the cultural context, for very rarely do sympathetic responses prove insightful across cultural boundaries. We need to briefly suspend our worldview and to participate as deeply as we can in the view of the other culture. According to a study at the University of Alberta, the "culturally insensitive individual, contrary to a pervasive myth, was revealed as the individual who believed that 'people are about the same everywhere'." This sympathetic response is inadequate to bridge the culture gap, and the study concluded that "culturally sensitive workers were those who evidence cultural empathy."²⁰ As cultural empathy aids communication in intercultural transitions, empathy in general should facilitate adaptation to all transition experiences.

The final personal correlate of successful adaptation to another culture may well be cultural complexity, which is defined by Draguns as "the number of descriptive and explanatory notions at one's disposal for the ability to make sense of and to integrate into a preexisting cognitive structure, discrepant, incongruous and surprising bits of information."²¹ He suggests that those who thrive on complexity and ambiguity are more likely to deal with the confusion of the transition experience comfortably. Exposure to a variety of cultures and worldviews helps us to tolerate differences more easily. We find the new culture stimulating and challenging rather than threatening and anxiety producing.

Potentials

The potential for stimulation and challenge is as much a part of culture shock and transition shock as is the potential for discom-

fort and disorientation. As Marris suggests, "Change appears as fulfillment or as loss to different people, and to the same person at different times."²² Culture shock need not be viewed as a disease; depending on the way we direct our change processes it may yield considerable growth. While few writers deal with culture shock in terms of personal growth, Adler attempts to offer that perspective. He writes that the

cross-cultural learning experience...is a set of intensive and evocative situations in which the individual experiences himself and other people in a new way distinct from previous situations and is consequently forced into new levels of consciousness and understanding.²³

Just as other life-change experiences often force us to examine our identities and adaptability, culture shock can also be perceived as a highly provocative state in which we may direct our energies toward personal development. We are forced into greater self-awareness by the need for introspection. We must reexamine our ability to form relationships and our communicative skills. We are also placed in the position of trying new norms and values and of experimenting with new behaviors. During transition experiences, our analytic processes are often in high gear, drawing on an unlimited wealth of diversity for comparison and contrast.

While I have suggested earlier that self-awareness and cultural empathy are significant personal characteristics in the adaptation process, it should also be noted that those characteristics may very well be developed during the cross-cultural learning process. Perhaps the greatest degree of shock in the cultural transition experience can be related to the recognition of our own values and beliefs in the light of the new environment.

Summary

It is evident that the culture shock experience is not necessarily an alien one. We may have had similar transition experiences in our lives before exposure to another culture, in any number of intracultural situations. If we recognize transition shock as a defensive response to the dissonance we feel when our worldview is assaulted, we can learn to cope with the symptoms and develop methods of channeling shock—including culture shock—into personal growth. With knowledge gained from those previous transitions, plus the personal characteristics of self-awareness, nonevaluativeness, cultural empathy, and cultural complex-

ity, we can transform our defensiveness into stimulating cross-cultural learning. How we deal with change affects our communication patterns. Perceived as disorientation, change may produce barriers and defensive communication. Perceived as challenge, change can stimulate creativity and flexible communication.

- ¹ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1970).
- ² Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).
- ³ Kalvero Oberg, "Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments," *Practical Anthropology* 7 (1960): 177.
- ⁴ Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (1959; reprint, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981), 174.
- ⁵ Peter S. Adler, "The Transitional Experience: An Alternative View of Culture Shock," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1975): 13.
- ⁶ LaRay M. Barna, "How Culture Shock Affects Communication," *Communication—Journal of the Communication Association of the Pacific* 4, no. 3 (1976): 3.
- ⁷ Peter Marris, *Loss and Change* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975), 45.
- ⁸ Oberg, "Cultural Shock."
- ⁹ Robert J. Foster, *Examples of Cross-Cultural Problems Encountered by Americans Working Overseas* (Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Office, May 1965).
- ¹⁰ Adler, "Transitional Experience."
- ¹¹ Marris, *Loss and Change*, 46.
- ¹² Dean Barnlund, "Communication: The Context of Change," in *Basic Readings in Communication Theory*, edited by C. David Mortenson (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 5-27.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁴ *U.S. Navy Overseas Diplomacy Guidelines for I.C.R. Specialists* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1973), 42-45.
- ¹⁵ Juris Draguns, "On Culture Shock, Biculturalism and Cultural Complexity," paper presented at the Symposium on Culture Shock as a Social and Clinical Problem, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1976, 5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁷ Barna, "How Culture Shock Affects Communication," 16.
- ¹⁸ Conrad Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff, *Introducing Social Change: A Manual for Community Development* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), 237.
- ¹⁹ Milton J. Bennett, "Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy," this volume.
- ²⁰ John Regan, *Culture Shock: An Exploration in Observation*, University of Alberta, Phi Delta Kappa, 1966.
- ²¹ Draguns, "On Culture Shock," 4.
- ²² Marris, *Loss and Change*, 46.
- ²³ Adler, "Transitional Experience."