THE IMPORTANCE OF NAVIGATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND COMPREHENDING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide an in-depth analysis on 'Culture Shock.' Focus will be channeled towards understanding how cultures vary and provide suggestions of overcoming the shock. In addition, the article will provide real-life experiences from different cultures to prevent any misunderstandings amongst cultures and promote cross-cultural communication. It is imperative to note that cultures are dissimilar. To this end, misunderstandings can be solved by being aware of the existence of cultural differences. This paper will provide examples from various countries and situations for readers not to misjudge, misunderstand, or even take things the wrong way, considering that we all have our own actions related to a particular culture.

To prevent one from experiencing culture shock, individuals should learn more about the food, dressing codes, religion, politics, language of the locals, before visiting any country. Notably, every country has its own way of expressing body language, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact.

Keywords: Culture, Culture Shock, Misunderstandings, Non-Verbal Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, Gestures, And Non-Verbal Modes

1. Introduction

At times, people misunderstand people from other countries owing to many differences in their culture, as compared to theirs. Over the years, studies have been carried out with the aim of providing more information on 'Culture Shock' besides creating awareness that every culture is different and as such, should be respected to avoid offending others. Culture shock can cause emotional stress and disillusionment to the individual experiencing it (Pedersen, 1994). To this end, it is imperative to know how to overcome the experience. Finding out about a new culture, such as one's language, behavior, sound, reactions, sights, experiences, and activities, may be exciting to you. It may seem like a new adventure; however, as one becomes more involved with the people, surroundings, he/she finds out the differences rather than the apparent similarities.

Notably, each country has its culture of expressing body language, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. This is bound to cause misunderstandings and conflicts when communicating with people from other cultures. Knowledge about one's cultural ways enables one to avoid misunderstandings besides encouraging cross-culture communication (Li, 2006). This study seeks to provide a detailed definition of culture shock, examples of cultural practices in various countries, and ways of achieving cross-cultural communication and behaviours that can help individuals to overcome culture shock.

2. What is Culture Shock?

Culture Shock is experienced by people from different countries all over the world. It is experienced when one moves or visits a new country where there is a completely new environment that has different dressing, language, food, and customs. When you move or travel to a new place, you are likely to face a lot of difficulties such as how you act to people around you, and what you say. It is bound to be different than the culture that you come from. You have to be very careful not to offend anybody or make them misunderstand you by the way you act or behave. Lai (2011) defines culture shock as entering a new environment with different emotions. Being away from family, close friends, colleagues, and teachers may enable people to feel uncomfortable due to not being familiar with the culture. Black and Gregersen (1991) denotes culture shock as individuals experiencing different behaviors that can be offensive in some home countries, but on the other hand may be acceptable in another country. Adler (1975) elucidates that culture shock is described as emotional reactions experienced by differences in culture and leads to misunderstandings of various experiences. Kohls (1984) describes culture shock as reactions that people experience different from their own culture when one moves to another country for a long period of time.

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According to psychologists, there are certain adjustments that can be used to show culture shock is taking place. Pedersen (1994) explains that a person experiencing culture shocks undergoes through the following six adjustments. An individual first realizes that their way of behavior is totally different from their new environment. Values that the guest considers to be desirable are not recognized in the country of residence. The disorientation as a result of these changes may affect the individual emotionally. They may be so intense to an extent of causing depression (Furnham&Bochner, 2005). There is then a general feeling of dissatisfaction with what is happening in the new place. An individual may also discover that the formula they used for recovering from certain cues is not applicable in this case. Another indicator is the sense of feeling that the disillusionment as a result of the shock may not end anytime soon. Any individual that experiences any or all of these consequences should know that he or she is undergoing a state of culture shock.

Culture shock has varying effects on the people experiencing it. It may cause one to reevaluate his/her culture and the host country's customs (Pedersen, 1994). The result could either be a positive or negative evaluation of the host culture (Furnham&Bochner, 2005). The phase of development and adjustment to the new environment has, in some studies, been referred to as the educational model and may result in positive insights despite the hardships experienced (McInnes, 2012).

As an educational model with both positive and negative results, culture shock occurs in five stages (Pedersen, 1994). The first stage is referred to as the honeymoon. It involves the excitement of being in a new environment. It is then followed by the breaking off from their familiar cues. The individual then integrates the new host's cues and slowly starts to adapt. In the third stage, an individual may exhibit negativity towards the new environment and practices (Stewart &Leggat, 1998). The fourth stage involves further development in integration to a point where an individual is able to show positive and negative aspects of the old and host culture. The fifth stage is characterized by achievement of biculturalism whereby the individual is now comfortable with both cultures and is able to live a normal life in the host country. However, there are controversies regarding the possibility of an individual to achieving complete state of multiculturalism.

3. Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-Cultural Communication is when we share our thoughts and ideas verbally and nonverbally between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Hurn and Tomalin (2013) state that communication fails due to cross-cultural relationships amongst cultures. The problem is not speaking different languages, although it can be part of the problem, but due to misunderstandings of communication. Klopf and Park (1982) claim that cross-cultural communication is interaction and communication with one another, thus the language patterns that are shared, but nonverbal modes are caused by culture. In order for us to avoid language and misinterpretations, we need to increase the understanding of other people and their own cultures.

The need for cross-cultural communication has greatly increased due to the diverse nature of workforce and globalization of corporations. An executive from a company may fly to another to discuss business partnership but cultural differences may affect effective communication. This and many other factors have led to the need for breaking cultural barriers to allow for free interaction between people from different backgrounds (Gudykunst, 2003). For any effective implementation of cross-cultural communication, there has to be an appreciation of cultural diversity (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Creation of awareness of other cultures can also help in realizing free communication and co-existence between different people from different cultures.

4. Real life experiences related to Culture Shock

This paper will focus on real-life experiences, experienced from different cultural backgrounds around the world. Different experiences will be shared related to culture shock taken from real life situations. To address the problem in dealing with culture shock, this study aims to explore the differences between cultures in order not to address any misunderstandings amongst cultures. Below are some examples according to different cultures.

This example is provided regarding culture shock by a Turkish and an English person. A Turkish exchange student was invited to stay with an English family for a week or two in London. When the Turkish student arrived, the English host asked if the student was hungry. The Turkish student replied, 'No, thank you.' The English host did not ask her again that day, why?. The English culture is direct, as they ask once and only once. The Turkish culture would ask repeatedly if you are hungry. It would not matter to them if you have just eaten or you are full. They would ask until they hear the answer 'yes.' This is because they

think that you are too shy to accept the offer. Because of this situation, the Turkish girl starved the whole night. The Turkish student thought that she would be asked again as she compared the English culture to her own culture. (Alice, personal communication, April 15, 2013). Mitchell (2000) contends that every country's culture is different, thus when one is away from home, he/she has to be accustomed to or be prepared to the deal with the different cultural values and embrace new practices.

Another example is related to the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspect of culture shock. An English man and a Turkish girl (a married couple) went to Turkey on holiday in the summer. The English man's name is 'Ben', and in Turkish, 'Ben' means 'I.' One day, the wife was looking for her husband and saw him swimming in the sea at a distance, so she called out his name (shouting), ' Ben, Ben, Ben….' The Turkish people around her were looking at her strangely as they understood 'I, I, I', in Turkish and they thought why is she calling herself for? She continued calling his name. Soon, she realized that people were looking at her and laughing.

4.1. Greetings

Greetings is a common practice in most cultures. It is a form of communication either verbal or non-verbal that is aimed at declaring presence or to establish rapport between individuals or groups (Gesteland, 2012). The type of greetings can also be used to show the nature of relationship or the social status of the involved individuals or groups (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). They are highly specific across cultures and the situation as at that time. Bouchara (2015) notes that even in the same culture, greeting may be different depending on the function and time. An understanding of a peoples' greetings behavior is crucial to avoid cases of embarrassment (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). Greeting may commonly involve a handshake, kiss, a slight bow or a verbal statement.

In Nigeria, the city Igbo, meeting people for the first time necessitates a handshake. For older people, they tend to bow (Mike, personal communication, March 07, 2018). In Ozbekistan, Tashkent, people put their right hand on their heart and bend their heads down a little, saying, "Assa.lomualegkum" (Muhammed, personal communication, March 07, 2018). In Pakistan, people hug each other and then shake hands (Umran, personal communication, March 07, 2018). In Nigeria, Oyo, the males prostrate to greet elders, while the females go on their knees (Jeff, Personal Communication, April 04, 2018). In Kenya, East Africa, people share handshakes for formalities; hugs are used to express friendship and love, and kisses are for close people (Steve, Personal Communication, April 04, 2018). In Nigeria, when an elderly person is seen by a young person, he or she tends to greet him/her with respect. For boys they prostrate, for girls they kneel down to greet which shows a sign of respect (Paul, Personal Communication, 04 April, 2018).

It is sometimes advisable not to initiate greetings if you are not conversant with the other party's culture. For instance, in most Asian cultures handshakes are not a common practice as bowing is the customary way of greetings (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). In such cases, initiating a handshake may seem like forcing them to greet you in a manner against their culture. Among the Latinos, contact during greetings is a common practice even between parties that have least family of friendship connection (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). Eibl-Eibesfeldt also notes that contact is minimized between individuals of opposite sex in the Arabic nations though same sexes can hug and shake hands.

Greetings are an important part in most cultures. However, it is important to understand a people's practices related to greetings. In the Vietnamese culture, it is inappropriate to shake a woman's hand unless she offers it first (Maurer & Smith, 2013). In some cultures, calling out the name of a person when greeting them is regarded as a sign of respect (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). In Ethiopian and Eritrean cultures, kissing on the cheek thrice is the preferred greeting among close people (Maurer & Smith, 2013). Depending on the individuals' nature of relationship, Russians can either shake hands or kiss on the cheek as a form of greetings (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2007). A handshake is the referred form of greetings for Americans between individuals who have met for the very first time or have no close relationship (Maurer & Smith, 2013). According to Maurer & Smith (2013) man to man greetings in Jamaica will involve a hand shake while maintaining eye contact. They also note that, in less formal situations, greetings may involve slight touch of the closed fists. Women can either shake hands, kiss or hug while a man can shake hands or kiss a woman depending on the nature of their relationship.

4.2. Time

The practice of keeping time has also been found to vary in different cultures. Most Western cultures perceive time as a factor with limited supply, thus are very strict in beating deadlines (Pant, 2006). However, some Western cultures have a more relaxed approach to time. In Belgium, the Flemish-speaking people are punctual while the French-speaking people show a rather unconcern with keeping time (Pant, 2006). The

Indians show concern for time depending on the magnitude of the effects of failuring to be punctual (Pharo, 2013). Most Western cultures have the habit of dividing time into slots and allocating different activities for each slot (Mahadevan, 2017). As analysed, different cultures have their own perception of time.

In Nigeria, people never stick to time and they are usually late. If they have to be somewhere at one, they are there at two. They call this 'Nigerian Time.' People believe that if they make it on time, they might have to wait. This way, the citizens do not really stick to time. They only do so where there is a need for it (Sarah, Personal Communication, March 07, 2018). In Pakistan, people usually get up early in the morning and they sleep early in the evening, so they are usually on time (Thomas, Personal Communication, March 07, 2018).

In the UK, the citizens are very strict with time. People make a great effort to arrive on time. It is considered impolite to be late (Jerry, Personal Communication, March 07, 2018). Africans are generally regarded as being poor in keeping time (Pharo, 2013). In the Southern African Country of Zimbabwe, people are punctual, but the schedules are relaxed (Tom, Personal Communication, April 04, 2018). In Kenya, keeping to time varies with people, but as a whole most people are mostly late with the excuse of "traffic." Serious people keep to time, as the old adage goes, 'Time is money' (Frank, Personal Communication, April 04, 2018).

4.3. Receiving Gifts

Gifting is a widely practiced etiquette in most cultures. However, it is greatly influenced by the person receiving it, his/her social status and the type of gift involved (Kravets, Maclaran, Miles, &Vankatesh, 2018). In some cultures, receiving a gift might be mistaken as an act of taking a bribe. This is a common connotation in the American business world, thus it is rarely practiced (Christiansen, 2015). There is a great emphasis on the process of giving and receiving gifts. In Saudi Arabia, one is supposed to receive gifts using their right hand (Kravets et al., 2018). Kravets et al (2018) further notes that men are not supposed to receive gold or silk presents. Gifts can be used to symbolize friendship, appreciation or in some cases reconciliation (Kravets et al., 2018). In Japan, the quality of the gift and its origin will influence the degree of appreciation by the receiver. Gifts from the West are considered more valuable than those from China or other Asian countries (Alston & Takei, 2005). In China, a person receiving the gift is expected to first refuse it before accepting it (Christiansen, 2015).

Kumayama (1991) posits that in the Japanese Culture, receiving and giving gifts with both hands is imperative. In addition, the Japanese are expected to stand up when receiving and giving the gift (Alston & Takei, 2005). Their culture dictates that it is a show of politeness for the gift receiver to at least refuse it before accepting it. The same goes for the foreigner. In the Turkish culture, it is known that when going to somebody's house for the first time, one should always bring something for the host if not, it is counted as rude, and the host should open the gift when received (Mehmet, Personal Communication, 07 March 2018). According to Indian culture, color red, green, and yellow are associated with luck, thus receiving a gift wrapped in any of these colours is highly appreciated (Kravets et al., 2018). A man is also not supposed to offer a gift to women unless he adds that it is from him and another female relative or associate (Alston & Takei, 2005). Omission of a female in the process of offering of a gift may be treated as a sign of flirting with the woman.

4.4. The OK Sign

Topan (2011) states that people from various cultures have different ways of using gestures, such as using hands and facial expressions. One may use a gesture that has a positive connotation in his/her own culture, whereas in a different culture, the same gesture may be viewed as impolite or offensive. The 'OK' sign has many meanings in different cultures. Topan (2011) contends that in the United States, it has a positive meaning, which means okay, but in Brazil, it is considered as obscene. In Turkey, it means 'gay.' An experience with an English teacher and Turkish students in the classroom shows that the 'OK' sign has many meanings. A student had answered a question correctly and the teacher did the 'OK' sign to the student. The student misunderstood and said 'teacher, what are you doing'? It is rude.' The teacher did not realize that she was wrong, until the student told her that it means 'gay' in Turkish. The teacher apologized and said that it means 'OK' in England.

In most cultures, the thumbs up gesture is used to mean 'OK.' However, in Bangladesh, the sign is of insult (Bates & Bates, 2008). In most cultures in the Middle East region, it is highly offensive (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010). Most English speaking countries have a common gesture for the 'OK' sign. This gesture is offensive and considered an insult in the Brazilian culture (Bates & Bates, 2008). When Richard Nixon, the former president of the United States, visited Brazil in the 1950s, he flashed this sign to the

waiting crowds. However, he was met with boos, as he was unaware that it is a sign of insult (Bates & Bates, 2008). In the Greek culture, where respect is a desired virtual, the thumbs up sign used to signify 'OK' while in other places it is a rude gesture (Bates & Bates, 2008). In Italy, West Africa, and most parts of South America, the thumbs up sign is also an offensive gesture equivalent to what the middle finger connotes in most western cultures (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010).

4.5. Eye Contact

Maintenance of eye contact has both positive and negative interpretations. In most Western cultures, maintaining eye contact is considered okay, unlike in many East Asia countries where it is a sign of rudeness (Bates & Bates, 2008). In some western countries, it is considered a sign of confidence and respect (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010). According to the Japanese culture, maintaining eye contact is interpreted as being disrespectful (Alston & Takei, 2005). Alston and Takei (2005) note that children in Japan are taught not to give eye contact, but to focus on the neck as it also falls within the peripheral vision. In the US, it is considered a show of interest in the person you are looking at and attentiveness to what they are saying (Bates & Bates, 2008). In Middle East cultures, it is inappropriate to maintain eye contact. Opposite sexes are not expected to have direct eye contact in these cultures (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997). However, it is not expected that men will not have direct eye contact with western ladies who are visiting Middle East countries (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997). Extensive eye contact between men during conversations in the Middle East is defined as a sign of telling the truth (Bates & Bates, 2008).

In China, it is impolite to directly look into one's eyes, whereas in America if one does not look into the eye of an individual, he/she is considered not to be telling the truth. Novinger, (2001) points out that in America if you look into someone's eyes for a long time, it is counted as threatening. Zhi- Peng, (2014:1031) states that there is an English saying which states, 'Don't trust anyone who will not look you in the eye.' In Ghana, direct eye contact is not allowed from child to adult. It is expected from children to look down when talking to their elders as a sign of respect. In Zambia, Lusaka, people from the same age group have to maintain eye contact, but for older people, they look down as a sign of humility (Susan, Personal Communication, 07, March , 2018). In most Asian and African cultures, consistent maintenance of eye contact is interpreted as a sign of challenging authority (Bates & Bates, 2008). Brief or lack of direct contact by a Japanese woman should not be mistaken as a lack of interest, but considered as a show of politeness and respect (Alston & Takei, 2005).

Maintenance of eye contact can also be a show of attention and respect. In Kenya, maintaining eye contact is very important, it shows concentration and allows interaction with the individuals in subject (Lucy, Personal Communication, 04 April, 2018). In Ghana, direct eye contact is not allowed from child to adult. In Native Americans culture, maintaining eye contact is also regarded as inappropriate (Bates & Bates, 2008). It was experienced in an English lecture from an English native speaking teacher that a student from Bangladesh looked like he was not listening to the lecturer in the classroom. He would have his head facing down, only he would answer when spoken to. This act was perceived as disrespectful by the English teacher as not looking at one's eyes during communication is considered rude because it shows that the person is not listening. It was later on found out that, in Bangladesh, as a sign of respect, one should look down. Only when spoken to should he/she look up and take part in the conversation. In Bangladesh, respect is shown to elders or people with a higher status by looking down and speaking only when is spoken to (Oguibe, 1992).

4.6. Kissing

Kissing is a common practice acknowledged in most cultures. Depending on the context, it might be used to signify love, respect, comfort, greetings or farewell (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997). Kissing is a popular behavior in the Western cultures though the number of kisses at one instance may vary (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010). Although kissing is widely acknowledged in most cultures, knowing who and where to kiss is the major difference (Alves 2011). In most Arabic cultures, kissing among members of the same sex is allowed while it is prohibited among people of the opposite gender (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010). There are also communities where kissing does not exist example being in Sub-Saharan cultures (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997).

Different cultures show varying habits related to kissing. In Egypt, Netherlands, Iran and Serbia, cheek kissing is done three times, two on one side and one on the other side (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010). Zenker&Kumoll (2010) contend that Italians and Hungarians kiss twice while Mexicans and Belgium only do it one-time. In Equador, as a form of greetings, women kiss on the right cheek while men from Oman will kiss on the nose after a handshake (Alves 2011). In rural Australia, a quick kiss on the lips while the mouth is closed is practiced (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997). In the 1950s, the stone bench located at Syracuse University

was used as a kissing spot where ladies who got kissed while sitting on it believed that they would not turn to be spinsters (Alves 2011). In Ireland, kissing the Blarney stone is believed to come with the gift of eloquence (Alves 2011). In some Western cultures, kissing on new year will ensure that a person does not remain lonely for the rest of the year (Zenker&Kumoll, 2010).

In Nigeria, it is rude to kiss in public and if it is done, people look at you strangely (Tony, Personal Communication, 30, March 2018). In Northern Cyprus, it is also considered rude to kiss in public and it is also stated that it is against the law (Ayşe, Personal Communication, 30, March 2018). Fast (1971) states that kissing is a social custom, which carries varied meanings to a variety of people. In the Asia region, kissing is not accepted in public, as it is considered a sexual act. On the other hand, in Turkey, close male friends and close female friends would tend to kiss one another on the cheek when greeting each other (Merve, Personal Communication, 06 March, 2018).

4.7. Refusing and Offering

Different cultures have varying perceptions towards offering and refusing. In India, a guest is not expected to turn down an offer for food upon visiting (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997). Even after refusing their treat, the host will go on to insist, due to their generous nature. A guest is not expected to thank the Indian host, as it may be interpreted as a form of payment for the generous gesture (Poortinga& Pandey, 1997).

The Turkish and Greek cultures are similar in terms of offering food. When a guest (native speaker of English) is invited to a Turkish home (non-native speaker), the Turkish always insist on offering food or inviting you to eat with them at the dinner table. They do not accept 'no' as a direct answer. Even if you have eaten, the Turkish people would still give you something to eat, whereas, in an English home, they would offer you something once, and if the answer is 'no,' they will not ask you the second time.

5. How to deal with Culture Shock

As aforementioned, culture shock is a common case to a person once he or she arrives in a new country with completely different way of life and cultures. However, to be in a position to survive harmoniously in the new environment, it is crucial to overcome culture shock. Psychologists argue that while travelling to new lands, it is advisable to keep an open mind as opposed to expecting the host culture to be similar to your own (Bates & Bates, 2008). This may help you to understanding the reasons for certain cultural practices and behaviours. They also advice not to interpret behaviour based on one's culture, but seek to understand the new environment (Thistlethwaite& Spencer, 2008). Comparing behaviour and practices with those from your native land might lead to negative perceptions of the new culture (Dutton, 2011).

To avoid facing any problems related to 'Culture Shock,' one is recommended to learn as much as possible about the new culture such as the food, dress, religion, politics, and language. Ferraro (2006) claims that before going to a new cultural environment, one should find out more information beforehand about that culture in terms of custom, values, and characteristics. According to Oberg (1986), guests should interact with the locals as a way of overcoming culture shock. However, it may be difficult, as language barrier will be the main challenge to this noble strategy.

Most individuals are able to overcome culture shock regardless of the time taken making the adjustment. According to Oberg's (as cited in Dutton, 2011) model of culture shock, all people have the same capacity to overcome it, as they just need to believe and accept that they are in a foreign country, thus the need to embrace to new ways of doing things and behaviour. The model seems to strongly argue that an individual's belief and customs can be changed so that they are able to adjust to the new culture and live a free life (Marx, 2011). Culture shock should be treated as a normal occurrence that is meant to make your experience more exciting (Bates & Bates, 2008). Positivity and the free will to adapt to a new culture is a powerful tool for overcoming this shock.

Making friends in your new environment may help in overcoming culture shock. According to Hale (1995), missionaries who were quick to associate with the local people and culture were able to overcome culture shock faster than those who held back to themselves. Making friends in your culture helps you in learning and appreciating them (Marx, 2011). It facilitates one to overcome pessimism, which is one of the symptoms of culture shock (Bates & Bates, 2008). Reaching out to the local people also helps in reducing the criticism of their beliefs and customs (Hale, 1995). Friendship with the locals may enable one to overcome culture shock through reduced ethnocentrism.

Training can also help in overcoming culture shock. Some psychologists have suggested that training on behavioural changes and host's cultural practices can greatly reduce this shock (Thistlethwaite& Spencer, 2008). This strategy helps in appreciating and providing a background on the new culture. Training

can either be done before travelling or after landing in the new country. One may learn the local language to ease of communication, a crucial factor in managing perceptions towards the new culture (Bates & Bates, 2008).

Conclusion

'Culture Shock' is experienced all over the world. An individual may face culture shock when travelling to another country. It can lead to emotional instability to a point of causing depression and self pity. Knowledge of overcoming it is vital. To deal with this problem, we should try to find ways to understand the new culture the best way we can. This strategy will assist in reducing any misunderstandings with people from different countries, thus not offending them, and most importantly, respect the differences in one's culture. Therefore, we should be aware of cultural differences, show understanding and respect to different cultures, and most importantly, build bridges where we misunderstand one's cultural background. However, more studies need to be done to either approve or disapprove Oberg's model, which suggests that through belief and self will, everyone can overcome culture shock.

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