

CULTURE SHOCK

- A SUBSTANTIVE SEGMENT OF THE CULTURE AWARENESS DIMENSION -

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Abstract

As a rule, any shock is perceived and experienced as a trauma. Culture shock can be described as that physical and/or emotional discomfort suffered when coming to live or perform in another country or another environment/context different from that of origin. Globalisation has triggered an upsurge in intercultural contacts, interaction, and, implicitly, a higher probability of culture shock occurrence, which increased awareness of the culture shock complexity. This paper focuses on what could be the main causes of culture shock occurrence nowadays?

1. Shock

As a rule, any **shock** is perceived and experienced as a **trauma**, be it psychological or physical. The consequences of exposure to novel or unfamiliar contexts of any kind may be varied and most unpredictable. So, each and every shock occurrence necessarily claims appropriate ways to prevent, alleviate or avoid. On the other hand, if a shock is assumed as a challenge, individuals need to take suitable precautions and measures in order to defend or prepare themselves to cope with it accordingly. These precautions and measures could be summed up by finding suitable remedies and viable solutions apt to attenuate or counteract culture shock. Naturally, this is the way to turn any possible occurrence/encounter of a shock from a destructive or counter-productive into a constructive or productive one – from a generator of danger and regress into one of safety and progress.

1.1. Culture shock

Culture shock can be described as that physical and/or emotional discomfort suffered when coming to live or perform in another country or another environment/context different from that of origin. When referring to culture, such a shock may generate anxiety, surprise, confusion, fear, uncertainty, or the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to perform in a new environment. This is obviously because the individual is not knowledgeable of what is appropriate or inappropriate in relationship with that specific context/environment.

The term **culture shock** appeared for the first time in 1958. It was used by the Canadian anthropologist Kalvero Oberg (1901-1973) with reference to people travelling abroad and getting into contact with new cultures. Ever since that time, culture shock has become a most ample and prolific topic of analysis and debate. Research work has, in turn, focused on its origins, causes, relationships, its prevention and, especially, on ways of getting prepared to cope and deal with it.

1.3. Origins and causes

What triggered the occurrence of culture shock is a matter of historical context and whatever might be associated with it: nature and amplitude of intercultural contacts, the background hosting it, manners in which it has been approached and dealt with, impact and its consequences or outcomes, etc.

During the times when people discovered ‘new worlds’ (the era of the great conquests and colonisation), culture shock could be fairly simply explained and dealt with through the specific means of intervention – above all, the power ascendancy of the conquerors. With time, however, things have considerably changed.

Now, what could be the main causes of culture shock occurrence nowadays?

Arguably, any list would at least comprise such elements as: globalisation, labour force movement, tourism, immigration, business relations and trade development, sojourners, international marriages, choice of education targets, etc. Yet, all of them have become more frequent and intense experiences due to the phenomenon of globalisation (a topic to be approached in a separate section), whether in its incipient stages or as we are experiencing it today. Each of the above (and, probably, many others) has become an intensely specialised area of research and has supplied most elaborate subjects in the specialised literature.

2. Intercultural contacts

Globalisation has triggered an upsurge in intercultural contacts, interaction, and, implicitly, a higher probability of culture shock occurrence, which increased awareness of the culture shock complexity. In parallel, means of alleviating or avoiding it were sought, techniques of making it as ‘user friendly’ as possible (awareness raising, appropriate preparation and training, availability of extended packages of information). Such techniques have also become a component of the culture shock issue.

In case the idea of shock is associated with cross-cultural interaction, any such situation will most surely find its antidote or remedy by probing into the very ingredients delineating the concept of culture: diversity, specificity, characteristics, relativity. If aware, knowledgeable and always alert about these elements, any individual has the chance to go further and try to establish contact and to explore or to perform on the ‘territory’ of a foreign cultural environment/context.

2.1. Enculturation, acculturation, transculturation

Any cross- or intercultural contact (as a potential generator of culture shock) instantly brings to the individual’s mind ideas of possible attenuation or avoidance, adequate preparation, viable solutions, ways of management and coping with etc. One way or another, any of these is connected with yet another acknowledged term in the field of research, of which any individual experiencing such situations needs to be aware of. This term has been defined as **acculturation**.

Unlike enculturation (first-culture learning), acculturation describes the process of second-culture learning and analyses those phenomena and mainly the consequences which appear when groups of individuals belonging to different cultures come into contact. It also deals with the subsequent changes that may occur in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.

Acculturation is generally considered a two-way factor of influence and change. However, according to statistics and research on the topic, it basically appears as **a set of modifications and adjustment experienced by and affecting a minority group in contact with a majority, i.e., a dominant one.**

Undoubtedly, acculturation remains a process of learning but, due to certain circumstances, one which is somewhat imposed by a majority. This is manifest during any process of assimilation occurring through the power of a dominant or host cultural context. A rather cynical, yet fairly objective description of the phenomenon is that a certain pattern of cultural learning is imposed upon a minority, due to the very fact that, again under the circumstances, the respective group is a minority (Ward, Bochner, Furnham, 2001).

Research data and results have also concluded that there are instances when intercultural contacts and further assimilation may be smooth enough and may lead to a non-violent and harmonious process of cultural merging, converging and sharing. Usually, this refers to the tendency and the process of resolving emerging conflicts peacefully, in time.

In a way, the phenomenon as such could appear only in our modern world. Practically, in ancient times, or even two or three hundred years ago, this was something almost inconceivable. This is because the rapid technological development, the existence of international organisations and agreements, or the speed of transportation and communication technology, considerably facilitated culture contacts and interaction. At the same time, awareness raising, well focused culture-knowledge training, as well as contact preparation, have known unprecedented development and have produced spectacular results. Technically, such situations are rendered by the term **transculturation** (used for the first time in 1947 by another reputable anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz).

3. Culture shock minimisation and avoidance

The shock resulting from intercultural contact finds its essential remedy in acquiring knowledge and understanding of the new, different cultural context. Appropriate preparation meant to raise awareness about another culture can definitely assure (besides shock, stress and trauma prevention or elimination) effective and pleasurable cultural interactions, a smooth psychological adjustment, social and community integration, profitable performance, etc.

This very act of preparation is a most varied enterprise, as it results from equally varied purposes or targets regarding any intercultural contact. According to most of the research in the field, culture shock has been studied in connection with various categories of people experiencing intercultural contact: tourists, sojourners, refugees, immigrants or displaced persons, students, business people, etc. Prevention and avoidance, through very specific means and techniques, has clearly become a specialised topic and target.

An analysis to be carried out in this respect needs to consider such elements as: purpose, the stay duration, and the context of contact as a whole. However, any preparation for a prospective intercultural contact should not be approached as a 'neat mathematical exercise'. No matter how earnest and focused an individual may be in approaching such a preparation stage, he/she should be always ready to face the unexpected. He/she needs to be, as effectively as possible, 'equipped' with **knowledge** about the target culture or cultures, to have the capacity to understand the feelings and needs of other people (**empathy**) and to show **self-confidence**, i.e., to know exactly what he/she

wants. It is also essential to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses and to exhibit emotional stability and common sense. To put it more suggestively (taking over a syntagm used by Geert Hofstede, 1994), the capacity and skill to **'learn how to unlearn'** might prove to be the most invaluable capital at this stage. In fact, this syntagm is food for **the ability and/or capacity of any individual or organisation to perform competently and successfully in cross- or intercultural contacts.**

Language is yet another substantive component of the knowledge 'tool-kit' while preparing for intercultural contact. Fair command of the language of another culture definitely transforms any individual from an observer into a potential participant, a cultural actor. This is because, by its very essence, a language does not supply only concrete linguistic mechanisms and tools: words, structures, rules. A language is a system that contains the power to 'teleport' an individual to **a new mind set**, to transfer feelings and train the individual to become familiar with new ways of thinking and behaving. By 'putting on' such new mind sets (through good command of a language), one can better understand the values, symbols, traditions or practices underlying a different culture. To speak another language means to hold the key to new experiences, to show you have interests and to be able to direct your interests to areas other than those operational only within your own culture.

Good command of a language is always a display of intelligence and a safe path towards multiculturalism. Any language other than your mother tongue is a most **reliable and durable culture shock attenuation or avoidance skill.**

On the other hand, a culture shock may be also considered a constructive challenge and a positive experience. It might be a propitious opportunity for learning and coping with new perspectives. Culture shock can exert beneficial influences across a wide spectrum. It can make someone develop better understanding of both oneself and others. It may constitute a stimulus of personal creativity and even an opportunity for redefining life goals. It enables an individual to communicate easily, to show understanding and goodwill across what he/she might have initially perceived or experienced as culture barriers.

If properly handled, culture shock may be an opportunity to know and test an individual's abilities and capacity to understand, adapt and cope with unknown cultural environments. A constructive or a destructive outcome following any intercultural contact overwhelmingly rests with the individual's choice, capabilities and skills. It is most important to be able to turn a shock trauma into a source of chances meant to cure it. Then, culture shock will have served its purpose as a provider of positive and constructive outcomes and the 'recovered victim' will have got the best of the two sets of experience underlying the 'two worlds'.

In sum, patience, understanding, flexibility, open-mindedness and a lot of wisdom are always vital and most reliable here.

4. Cultural and intercultural competence

In dealing with culture shock (whether positively or negatively experienced), and considering what has been mentioned above, one cannot overlook or remain unaware of some basic elements related to appropriate and successful behaviour in case of intercultural or cross-cultural contacts. Such basic elements could be suggestively described through the term of **cultural competence.**

From the very start, a successful outcome in this respect is provided by effectiveness in interaction. In order to be effective in such instances, individuals as well as organizations, companies or businesses need to observe the following:

- **to be aware** and conversant with one's own culture specificity and particularities;
- to exhibit a **commonsensical attitude** in interpersonal exchanges and to respect cultural differences;
- **to be knowledgeable** of various patterns of cultural behaviour and practices;
- **to develop appropriate cross-cultural and/or intercultural skills** – that is, to learn, understand, and act accordingly.

In turn, these reference elements (awareness, attitude, learning and skills acquiring) have been used in research work and culture analysis approaches as instruments meant to facilitate estimation and measurement of cultural competence. Such instruments may assess and evaluate interaction parameters. They can describe an individual's capacity to get rid of prejudice, to understand specific characteristics of perception, feeling, thinking or acting in contact with another culture.

Cultural competence also refers to exhibiting attitudes (considering options or preferences) that show a sensible and correct appreciation of the values underlying a given culture. In doing so, the individual exhibits both cultural and cross-cultural sensitivity and competence (Hofstede, 1997).

In fact, all these lead to the very definition and meaning of cultural/cross-cultural competence, i.e., **the ability to act and interact effectively both in your own culture and in contact with another or others.**

Cross-cultural competence is surely a means to transform tension, distrust and conflict into profitable communication and interaction of all kinds. It is important to consider the fact that such competence is a developmental process which is acquired, internalised and put to good use in time. It presupposes will, understanding and effort; it is something that cannot be acquired or 'learned overnight'.

5. Conclusion

The line of thinking, thereby, would follow its logical and commonsensical path by observing a minimum number of hypotheses and/or queries. Each one of these (and the list is but a tentative one) may be considered as a topic for discussion and debate, and each of them may constitute separate chapters of culture shock analysis.

- Being attributes of a certain entity (in this particular case, culture), diversity, specificity or relativity are highly improbable to appear as 'sealed off' from the rest of the world; consequently, they are inevitably bound to interact or get into contact.
- Entities seen as cultures are dynamic elements and they will necessarily interact through contacts of various kinds;
- Are 'surface structure' (an outsider's perspective on and approach to culture) and 'deep structure' (an insider's perspective and approach) useful assessment criteria of culture shock prevention or avoidance?
- If a cross- or intercultural contact occurs, is it always equated to a shock?

- Is a cross-cultural contact a necessary or a preventable shock?
- If occurring, is there a culture shock and its impact a two-way stance of behaviour?
- Is the prospect of a culture shock a challenge? Why?/Why not?
- Is culture shock manageable? And if so, in what ways?
- To what extent can or should knowledge and awareness raising prove to be means for culture shock prevention and avoidance?
- Are there facilitating and/or remedial methods that enable individuals to understand culture contact, to turn it to good account rather than contemplate or experience it as a shock?
- Culture shock seen as a positive challenge – constructive and productive, rather than counterproductive or traumatic.

Just by exercising deeper insights and probing into issues like those mentioned above, it will be obvious that they will always remain open to amendment. At the same time, such issues should be considered incentives for analysis, debate and elaboration, as any of them, if constructively approached, may provide desired and useful remedies and clues in dealing with intercultural relationships and culture shock.