

〈論文〉

# CULTURAL BREAKTHROUGH —TOWARD THE POSITIVE CONCEPT OF CULTURE SHOCK—

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## I. Introduction

As the global community becomes increasingly closer, there seems to be an overwhelming amount of information on culture, custom, and communication styles of foreign countries. Most of the new comers however, still experience a certain amount of stress and some of them suffer a great deal during the process of going through an intercultural encounter with the host culture. It is commonly regarded as the result of not coping properly with or lacking the knowledge of the phenomenon which occurs during such processes.

This paper aims, primarily, to renew the general notion and polarity of the term “culture shock,” which has been traditionally regarded as negative, by focusing on its positive notions in order to break the vicious circle of regarding it as an isolated instance for the individuals who lack their ability to adjust to a new cultural environment, thus, it is something that should be suppressed or hidden.

The second point to be made is that a temporary resident or sojourner should not adapt him/herself to the new culture to the extent that he/she might suffer reverse culture shock after returning home. Instead, he/she has to understand the similarities and differences between the host culture and his/her own and adjust him/herself only temporarily. Moreover, he/she can even live in two time zones that run parallel to each other thanks to the availability of the Internet and e-mail communication nowadays.

First, the paper will examine the concept of “culture” and “intercultural encounters” in relation to the different types of new comers. Second, it compares different sets of the stages

of “cultural adjustment” proposed by different researchers as well as the present writer’s experience and observation. Thirdly, it will compare the negative concept of “culture shock” and its symptoms with the positive one, namely, “cultural breakthrough.” Finally some general conclusion will be drawn.

## II . Culture and Intercultural Encounters

This section will look at the definitions of the term “culture” and distinctive concepts of “intercultural encounters” in relation to the different types of new comers. Culture is generally defined as a historically transmitted system of symbols and standards. The term is used in the sense as the life patterns shared by people in social groups including national, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, regional, and gender groups.

Culture is also defined as the traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and thought patterning handed down from generation to generation. In his *Intercultural Communication*, Jandt refers to, first; a self-sustaining community or population, second; the totality of that group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values and assumptions about life that guide behavior, thirdly; that this is a process of social transmission of the thoughts and behaviors over the course of generations, and finally; members who consciously identify themselves with that group.

It is clear from the above definitions that a person’s original culture is the collective programming imprinted in his/her mind as he/she grows up, surrounded by the cultural environment where he/she learns culture and its feature. Every individual learns culture from his/her environment such as family earlier in life and from its social relationships and the social environment, in particular the media.

This is why culture affects in all learned and acquired behaviors and it is easy to assume that an individual who has a firm set of original values and beliefs may experience their collapse in a totally different cultural environment unless he/she adjusts to the local cultural equivalent.

A new comer more often than not experiences the stress caused by the gap between his/her long-accumulated values and beliefs and that of the host culture because of different cultural premises and assumptions of the host society during a face-to-face intercultural encounter.

The intercultural transformation is understood to be the result of such a series of new face-to-face encounter of exchanging messages, in which case not only the messages themselves

but the way they are expressed will be based on each individual's implanted culture. Each change could be of minor significance if it is the situation of low involvement and it could be significant change in an active discussion. The transformation is seen as any shift in the artifacts and production, in the values and norms or in the basic assumptions of each individual.

The situation differs, however, depending on the expectation and preparation level of the individual and whether he/she came to the host society merely as a traveler or visitor, medium period sojourner or temporary resident such as international student or business representative temporary transferred, or as a person intending to stay for a long period as in the case of permanent residents or immigrants. The stress pattern varies depending on whether the individual is in the host society as a result of his/her own choice or forced by someone else.

Keeping the above in mind, this paper will now focus on the temporary residents and medium-to-long term sojourners including exchange students and international students. Contrary to what is believed in general, they do not necessarily have to adapt to the host culture so much to the extent that he/she might face "re-entry" or "reverse" culture shock. According to my observation and the results of the questionnaires, reverse culture shock after returning to the original culture is found to be far more damaging than initial culture shock. Instead, metaphorically speaking, he/she only has to adjust as if setting his/her watch to the local time soon after the arrival.

Moreover, it is even possible that he/she live simultaneously in two time zones that run parallel to each other, namely, the host time and home time as if wearing a double-faced world watch, because of the emergence of easier and less expensive Internet access and, thus, frequent e-mail communication. This seems to be a better way for some students than to adjust his/her watch and keep wondering what time it might be back home, to cope with or to avoid prospective reverse culture shock.

### III. Stages of Adjusting to a New Culture

A majority of international and exchange students have certain knowledge of the stages of cultural adaptation and culture shock through pre-departure education or courses provided by the host university. Partially because the negative aspects of culture shock is often emphasized and because its uniqueness in severity and order/cycle depending on each individual are not emphasized enough, some of the students wait, in fear, for the worst phenomena to occur and thus, waste valuable time when they could have enjoyed the stay.

This section will look at various sets of stages of cultural adjustment suggest by Western researchers who describe the adjustment process, over several stages. The process of adjustment is often described as “U-shaped” which refers to the phases experienced overseas or “W-shaped” which includes the prospective reverse cultural shock that may occur after returning to the home society.

The initial “honeymoon phase” or “euphoria phase” is characterized by fascination, elation and optimism on the side of the individual exposed to an alien culture. The sojourner notices more of the similarities and even if he/she did notice the differences, they will appear favorable and exciting and do not appear significant. In the “hostility phase,” the second phase, which arrives after the initial euphoria, the individual shows stereotyped attitudes towards the host society or culture. He/she seeks closer contact to fellow sojourners. The third stage is characterized by the improved language skills and the ability to get around in the new culture. It means that the individual has recovered from phase two. In the “adjustment stage,” or final stage to the host culture is as complete as possible. New customs are well accepted and enjoyed.

Adler introduces five phases of a cultural adjustment: Initial “contact phase” in which the individual is in a contact phase. The individual experiences excitement and euphoria, the new culture is seen ethnocentrically. In the “disorientation phase,” which is the second phase is marked by the disintegration phase, the cultural differences become increasingly noticeable, thus, result in confusion, alienation and depression on the side of the individual.

Adler then points out that during the “reintegration phase,” the third phase, individual strongly rejects the second culture. Here, he/she has to choose either to regress to earlier stages or to move on to a higher level of adaptation. The “autonomy stage,” the fourth step is marked by the increased understanding the second culture and a feeling of autonomy and competence on the side of the individual. In the final phase, the independence stage, the individual cherishes the cultural differences. He/she has an increased self- and cultural awareness and displays creative behavior to accommodate the new culture in its own worldview.

These phases do not necessarily appear in the right order but often concurrent and repeat themselves in shorter cycles. Though not many returnees talk about their culture shock, it can be experienced virtually by anyone, starts by being exposed to a totally different culture and different communication styles. Where and when the encounter occurs, and how different the cultural background of the participants in the intercultural communication are will have a signif-

icant influence on the severity and duration of such a shock.

#### IV. Culture Shock

The polarity and notions of the term “culture shock,” which has been traditionally regarded as negative, should be re-defined by focusing on its positive concepts in order to break the vicious circle to save the students from stress and fear of culture shock.

The term “culture shock” was first introduced by Oberg, anthropologist, who coined the phrase in the 50's to give the stressful and difficult experience of expatriates, specialists and elites abroad, rather than immigrants or refugees. It may therefore better explain the sojourners' process of adjustment. The four stages are, “Honeymoon” – “Crisis” – “Recovering” and “Adjustment.”

Oberg introduced the term to express the disorientation, confusion, and emotional reactions which surface when people live in an alien culture. Key factors which effect culture shock are “physical conditions” and “psychological factors” often caused by “physical factors,” as well as “language.” For example, if an exchange student is offered unfamiliar food, “Language” shock will be added in the case that the student's host language level is not high enough to explain the reason or to decline it politely without hurting the locals' feelings. A certain basic level of language or a cultural interpreter is required for less stressful initial settling and communication with the locals.

As an NPO exchange coordinator for an international educational exchange program as well as the academic coordinator for the faculty-to-faculty exchanges at Sapporo University, this writer has been witnessing various symptoms of culture shock. Some of the common psychological symptoms include loneliness, sense of isolation, exhaustion, drowsiness, extreme concern for cleanliness, need to keep reading in the first language, excess eating, drinking and smoking. Some of the physical symptoms, which comes from psychological causes, are headache, skin irritation, allergies, stiff muscles, asthma, sneezing, coughing, eye disease, irregular pulse and growing hoarseness of voice, some of which occur simultaneously.

More serious culture shock occurs when the issue related to identity or inferiority complex are involved. In one of the isolated instances, a Japanese participant in the NPO educational exchange program developed the mental breakdown and threatened to kill other compatriots whose English were better than his. In other case, a Japanese exchange student who did not consider herself an Oriental, as is the case of many Japanese, was shocked to be treated as

an Oriental, thus a minority, who could not mingle with any of the other groups, developed an identity crises. Although these examples must have been from mild culture shock at the beginning, polarity could have been reversed if there had been a local cultural interpreter or guide such as an academic coordinator or counselor. Surprisingly enough, both of them kept sending very positive reports telling how they were well accepted by everyone, how their skills in the new language were improving and how they are enjoying everything.

Although it is natural to interpret the symptoms as negative signs, thus culture shock itself as a negative notion, what is important to recognize is that even if the serious psychological symptoms are detectable, many of the physical symptoms are easily confused with regular health problems. As a result, some of the sojourners do not even notice the fact that there has been a culture shock and there often is a tendency to deny the possibility even if he/she suspects it. This can cause misunderstanding on the part of the hosts because, for example, the sojourner with excessive drowsiness and exhaustion may appear to be lazy and not willing to participate in the host society.

Sometimes, the sojourner, recognizing the symptoms of culture shock, suffers from lack of the cure or countermeasure, makes all the efforts to conceal it by acting in the opposite way, for example, excessive lightheartedness instead of showing the sign of being depressed. Then, there have been cases where the sojourner forgets, or unconsciously forces him/herself to forget the fact to make believe that the stay was successful.

This forms a vicious circle of "lack of knowledge," "not noticing," "noticing," "suppressing," "recognizing," "hiding," "acting," "denying," "refusing to admit," "forgetting." It is important that each individual is prepared to experience the culture shock and also to regard it as a rite of passage or sign leading him/her to the higher level, with more positive notions, thus it is all right to discuss it with others.

Adler argues that "Culture shock is thought of as a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth. Rather than being only a disease for which adaptation is the cure, culture shock is likewise at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience. It is an experience in self-understanding and change" (1987).

Kinzie, Tran et al. found a positive correlation between culture shock and the mental illnesses resulting from the stress experienced (Kinzie, Tran et al., 1980; 1986) while Ruben and Kealey's research suggests culture shock may have a positive influence on social and professional effectiveness (Ruben & Kealey, 1979).

Weaver does not agree to Oberg's view of culture shock as a disorder or a disease but rather considers culture shock as a process of adjustment to healthy personal growth which occur each time the new comer enters alien cultures, and its symptoms are psychological and physical reactions to the intercultural stress. Weaver's view seems to support the positive concept of culture shock, thus reverses the polarity. Weaver's stages are "Flight (the urge to fly back home)" – "Fight (disliking the locals)" – "Filter (learning new set of cues)" and "Flex (learning to act culturally appropriately)."

It could be the name "culture shock" which makes the new comer feel embarrassed to admit since it can sound like the sign of failed global citizen who is unable to become a trans-cultural citizen as a result of dragging the tail of the home culture with him/her. Such a shock, however, can cause a positive reflection upon the individual, and the new views and values may come from the new cultural environment.

There are several ways of better expressing the reactions and symptoms than the term "culture shock" in order to wipe off its negative connotation. "Emerging" as an individual with new additional cultural values and interpersonal communication skills, rather than "molding" which implies casting off the home culture or its values. "Cultural Tunnel" could be good to indicate that there will be the light waiting on the other side. I would like, however, to propose the term "Cultural Breakthrough" in place of "Culture Shock" in order to clearly convey the message I stated in the present paper.

The intercultural stress must be regarded as a stimulant for growth, creativity and impulse to learning and experiencing new things which seemed to be distant until then. Temporary disorientation should thus be considered as the springboard for jumping up to the next phase, out of stress from intercultural encounters into growth and cultural transformation. The process is much easier for the sojourner if he/she is aware that there is no need to be totally acculturated or because they are temporary residents who only has to adjust the cultural watch. It may help that not all of the sojourners but quite a few of them will become "bicultural" or "multicultural" after experiencing a series of cultural breakthroughs.

## V. Conclusion

In the first section, this paper, primarily aimed to reverse the polarity of "culture shock," which traditionally regarded as negative. It also aimed to provide sojourners, including international and exchange students, with the less stressful view that they are not required to be

acculturated, becoming bicultural, or adapt to the host society but to temporary adjust to the local culture while maintaining the parallel contact with the home culture. Finally, the new term, “Cultural Breakthrough” has been proposed to better imply the positive polarity of “Culture Shock.”

The situation of the sojourners and temporary residents, especially the exchange students/international students, are different from the immigrants who are common research subjects of the cultural adaptation studies of the Western models in spite of the subjects the term “culture shock” originally focused on. They are different in terms of choice, period of stay as well as advice and knowledge. Firstly, they have chosen to join the host culture with a clear objective, namely, academic purpose and international experience. Secondly, their period of stay is limited to one to four academic years, or in some cases one semester. Thirdly, they usually have academic or exchange coordinators/counselors from whom they can receive support, and advice and most of them have opportunities to study/read about culture shock and cultural adaptation.

These factors can play a positive role in strengthening their intercultural competence. It is not totally proportionate to their language competence but, most importantly, to the competence of accepting culture shock as a positive concept and to grow after each cultural breakthrough. It is natural that none of the students experienced cultural breakthrough in exactly the same way. Those students who are able to recognize the symptoms objectively as a necessary step for cultural breakthrough enjoy successful temporary adjustment and suffer less severe damage after re-entry.

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