

CULTURE SHOCK AS A SOCIAL ISSUE

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Abstract: *Previous research has explored common dimensions of culture shock across groups of international students, examined factors influencing intercultural adjustment of individual sojourners, and in the meantime, suggested that communicating with same culture members is minimally helpful for intercultural adjustment. By investigating a Chinese student organization on a US campus and analyzing the qualitative data collected via multiple methods, the researcher found that (a) culture shock is contextually based; (b) a student organization can play an instrumental role in helping students to cope with culture shock and gain intercultural competence by providing social support; and (c) communicating with same culture members can help intercultural adjustment. Implications for international student orientation, study abroad programs, and community-based help programs for international students are discussed.*

Key words: *Culture shock, interculture, shock accross Introduction*

Introduction

In today's business world the importance of international negotiations and cooperation is steadily growing. Every company from middle-sized family operations to large Multi National Companies is somehow involved in international business and therefore has to deal with intercultural issues.

Due to increasing international competition, worldwide marketing activities, new market access opportunities and a fast growing number of international mergers and acquisitions, managers and employees are necessarily confronted with international projects and assignments, or becoming an expatriate working and living abroad.¹ This development explains why it is increasingly important to train managers and staff in intercultural awareness and skills additionally to technical and professional qualifications.

A very significant aspect in the field of intercultural management is the issue of Culture Shock, which is discussed in this work. However, before starting to go into detail on Culture Shock, its causes, consequences and possible solutions it makes sense to define the term culture in general.

Main part

Definition of Culture Shock

The term Culture Shock was first mentioned in literature by Kalvero Oberg in 1960. In his article Oberg defined Culture Shock as follows: "Culture Shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life.

Oberg refers to the visual aspects of culture like behavior, language, and customs, because in contrast to values and beliefs they can be observed. The fact that people tend to judge visual aspects applying their own values and beliefs is responsible for the anxiety. Many scientists dealt with the phenomenon of Culture Shock and found own definitions but most of them stick very closely to the one Oberg gave in 1960. Hofstede for example states that Culture Shock is a "state of distress following the transfer of a person to an unfamiliar cultural environment", which may also be accompanied by physical symptoms. For Bock it is a disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness produced by the direct exposure to an alien society and Elisabeth Marx just called it "the experience of foreignness". All of these definitions have in common, that they see Culture Shock as an unpleasant reaction to being faced with a foreign culture.

The word shock fits for the actual event of Culture Shock, the state of distress after an initial enthusiasm. However, besides this rather narrow interpretation of Culture Shock there is also a broader point of view, which includes the whole process of adaptation during an international encounter. This process is also known as acculturation, referring to "changes that occur as a result of continuous firsthand contact between individuals of differing cultural origins." Acculturation as a state means the extent of adaptation to a foreign culture and as a process it refers to the change over time. Intercultural encounters can expose individuals to heavy acculturative stress that in most cases leads to Culture Shock.

Almost everybody who spends some time abroad experiences the problem of Culture Shock. This holds true for tourists, as well as exchange students, sojourners, expatriates, migrants and refugees. It is obvious that the severance of Culture Shock varies significantly among these groups. The experience is not only limited to those individuals engaged in geographical movement, but also affects sedentary communities, such as indigenous peoples or ethnic groups in plural societies. Even within organizations there is the possibility of Culture Shock referring to different business cultures. These cultures usually consist of occupational and organizational components and reside rather in people's practices than in their values. Due to restrictions as to the volume of this paper, the work mainly focuses on sojourners, that are sent abroad for the sake of a business assignment. The various forms of international staff employment include business trips lasting for a few days or weeks, the secondment ranging from some months to two years, and the long-term delegation for several years or even permanently. The effects of Culture Shock are usually limited to the last two forms of international

assignment. As the so-called expatriates are still mainly male employees and for the sake of easier reading, in most cases only the male grammatical form was used.

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE SHOCK FOR THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

Culture Shock including its variety of symptoms and outcomes is a completely normal physical and psychological reaction to a foreign environment. "It is a myth that experiencing Culture Shock is a weakness or a negative indication of future international success. Culture shock in all its diverse forms is completely normal and is part of a successful process of adaptation." Culture shock is the best and maybe even the only means to experience and understand foreign cultures. The anxiety and stress related to the adaptation process are not bad in and of themselves. The extent of adjustment does not depend on whether the negative symptoms of Culture Shock are experienced, but how they are coped with. In fact, they can have positive outcomes in the end, by serving as a hint that something is not right and therefore motivating thinking about how to adjust. Culture shock serves as an indicator that there is something to explore about the foreign as well as the own culture. Besides seeing Culture Shock as a completely normal process there are also approaches that state that additional acculturative stress might result in faster and more effective acculturation. This view is supported by a study among Canadian expatriates in Africa that showed that those who experienced Culture Shock were most effective in the end. "Expatriates who were most aware of themselves and their emotions experienced the most intense Culture Shock, but it was exactly because of this intense awareness of differences that they were also able to adapt more effectively later on."

Conclusion

"Culture Shock is a sudden and disturbing impression on the mind or the own concept of culture produced by some unwelcome occurrence or perception in a foreign culture lasting depression, a thrill, or an excited feeling of any kind."

Now that the concept of Culture Shock is a bit clearer it is possible to have a closer look at this assumption and try to evaluate it.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is not possible to overcome these symptoms and become functioning again. Culture Shock varies largely in severance. Some adapt more quickly and others need a longer time to get adjusted, but most people do overcome the crisis. Appropriate intercultural training and therefore intercultural competence helps a lot during the Culture Shock process, but unfortunately it cannot avoid it completely.

It is definitely true, that the experiences can last depression. The various psychological and physical symptoms were covered thoroughly in this work.

Altogether the assumption was not completely wrong. Culture Shock is a shock caused by being confronted with a different culture, but there is far more to the concept than that

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