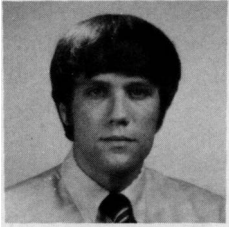


# THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCE: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF CULTURE SHOCK



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Increasing interaction across interpersonal, social, ethnic, national, and cultural barriers necessitates new understandings of the dynamics, the problems, and the implications of cross-cultural experiences. One need not sojourn outside one's own country to experience culture shock or to undergo a cross-cultural experience. Such transitional experiences, for example, happen to minority students entering college, to parolees from prison, to returning veterans, to married couples who divorce, and to those who change roles or occupation in midcareer. The frustrations as well as the growth and development inherent in such interactions can be experienced in one's own culture. The phases, the difficulties involved, and the consequences of such experiences, however, are most readily understood in the cross-cultural experience where psychological, social, and cultural differences are most distinct.

Culture shock has traditionally been thought of as a form of anxiety which results from the misunderstanding of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social interaction. Descriptions of culture shock by those who have experienced it reflect reactions ranging from mild irritability to panic and crisis. Although culture shock is often defined as an illness or disease (Foster, 1962; Oberg, 1958), it is most often treated as a field problem in adaptation and adjustment (Arensberg & Niehoff, 1964). 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 misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences. It may encompass feelings of helplessness; irritability; and fears of being cheated, contaminated, injured, or disregarded. The many examples of cross-cultural confusion among exchange students, Peace Corps volun-

teers, and international businessmen suggest a wide spectrum of responses and reactions to new cultural surroundings.

In one sense, then, culture shock is a form of alienation. In another sense, however, it suggests the attempt to comprehend, survive in, and grow through immersion in a second culture. Although culture shock is most often associated with negative consequences, it can be an important aspect of cultural learning, self-development, and personal growth. It is the contention of this article that the problems and frustrations encountered in the culture shock process are important to an understanding of change and movement experiences, and that such transitional experiences can be the source of higher levels of personality development. Implicit in the conflict and tension posed by the transitional experience lies the potential for authentic growth and development, "the transcendence from environmental to self support [Perls, 1969]."

The model of the transitional experience is based on the following assumptions, premises, and hypotheses:

1. Modern persons, and especially Westerners, tend to live within discontinuous, overlapping fragments of experience. Most often, the politics, education, occupation, and social life of the individual are somewhat distinct from one another. Each sphere of activity is a partially separate reality. The individual thus refers to numerous, often changing groups for identity, loyalty, and outlook. Simultaneously, however, there are tendencies toward integration, gestalt, and wholism. As each person attempts to comprehend both the universe and him- or herself, these two tendencies come into interplay. In situations of psychological, social, or cultural tension, each person is forced into redefinition of some level of his or her existence.

2. "A pattern of perceptions which is accepted and expected by an identity group is called a culture [Singer, 1971]." The patterns of perception which an individual experiences and reflects at any given time are, in large part, determined by the individual's outlook, orientation, and world view. Culture, in addition to being a perceptual frame of reference, is an environment of experience. Every person experiences the world through his or her own culturally influenced values, assumptions, and beliefs.

3. Most individuals are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. Transitional experiences, in which the individual moves from one environment or experience into another, tend to bring cultural predispositions into perception and conflict.

4. Psychological movements into new dimensions of perception and new environments of experience tend to produce forms of personality

disintegration. "Disintegration is the basis for developmental thrusts upward, the creation of new evolutionary dynamics, and the movement of personality to a higher level . . . [Dabrowski, 1964]." The reorientation of personality at higher levels of consciousness and psychic integration is based upon the disintegrative aspects of personality inherent in the conflict and confusion of movement and change experiences.

Frustration is a phenomenon of life itself. In situations which demand personal change, however, emotions tend to be more totally and completely felt. This deeper level of affect is more intensely experienced where the transition to a different environment of experience creates behavioral and attitudinal conflicts. "When the human being," writes Erik Erikson (1964), "because of accidental or developmental shifts, loses an essential wholeness, he restructures himself and the world by taking recourse to what we may call 'totalism.' It is an alternate, if more primitive, way of dealing with experience, and thus has, at least in transitory states, a certain adjustment and survival value."

The following model of the transitional experience suggests that specific psychological, social, and cultural dynamics occur when new cultures are encountered and that these behavioral dynamics are, in large part, a function of perceptions of similarities and differences as well as changed emotional states. The model of the transitional experience also implies that a successful cross-cultural experience should result in the movement of personality and identity to new consciousness of values, attitudes, and understandings. To that extent, the model is both prescriptive as well as descriptive.

## TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCE

The transitional experience is a movement from a state of low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness. Although the transitional experience is, in some respects, analogous to the *U* and *W* curves of adjustment suggested by Lysgaard (1955) and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), no attempt is made to attach time sequences to each of the stages. Where the *U*- and *W*-curve hypotheses reflected the peaks and valleys of adjustment through time, they took no account of the more encompassing and progressive changes in identity which can ensue from the culture shock process. It is not assumed that subsequent stages in the process of transition automati-

cally require preceding ones, since different individuals will have various backlogs of experience in dealing with cultural distinctions. The five phases of the transitional experience, however, delineate a progressive depth of experiential learning.

### *Contact*

In the initial contact with a second culture, the individual is still functionally integrated with his or her own culture. In the earliest contacts the individual views the new environment from the insularity of his or her own ethnocentrism. The contact stage is marked by the excitement and euphoria of new experience. The individual may be captivated and enchanted by the new culture and its seeming contrast to previous experiences. In the contact phase, however, the individual is far more attuned to similarities than differences. Differences are perceptually deselected since the individual has few psychological mechanisms for dealing with radically new stimuli. Similarities between the new culture and the individual's home culture tend to become validations of his or her own cultural status, role, and identity. Such validations serve as reinforcement for the continuation of his or her own cultural behavior.

### *Disintegration*

The second stage of the transition is marked by a period of confusion and disorientation. Differences become increasingly noticeable as different behaviors, values, and attitudes intrude into the perceptual reality of the sojourner. As cultural distinctions come into the perceptual foreground tension and frustration increase as the individual's ability to interpersonally and socially predict is deflated. His or her own cultural understandings are no longer appropriate and do not bring their expected results. More important is the growing sense of being different, isolated, and inadequate to new situational demands. Bewilderment, alienation, depression, and withdrawal give rise to disintegration of personality as confusion over individual identity in the new cultural "scheme of things" mounts.

### *Reintegration*

The reintegration phase is characterized by strong rejection of the second culture. Cultural similarities and differences are rejected

through stereotyping, generalization, evaluation, and judgmental behavior and attitude. The individual is hostile to that which is experienced but not understood in terms of his or her vocabulary of experiences. In this stage of the transition, the individual may regressively seek out relationships with only those of his or her own culture. Personal difficulties may be projected onto the second culture as the individual defensively withdraws into the security of the familiar. The exercise of negative feelings, however, can be a significant sign of healthy reconstruction in that there is a growing cultural awareness and an increasing ability to act on feelings. Rejection of the culture that causes negative feelings is more than a reactive behavior and becomes the basis for new intuitive, emotional, and cognitive experiences. The reintegration phase of the transition may be a point of existential choice for the individual experiencing a broad spectrum of intense emotions. The individual, as it were, may regress to the superficial behaviors and responses of the contact phase or move closer to a resolution of the difficulties and frustrations being encountered. Returning home may also be an alternative to the dilemmas posed by stressful experiences in the second culture. The *choice* that the individual makes might depend on the intensity of the experiences, the general resiliency of the individual, or the interpretation and guidance provided by significant others.

### *Autonomy*

The autonomy stage of the transition is marked by a rising sensitivity and by the acquisition of both skill and understanding of the second culture. The individual is, to a large extent, independent of previous defensiveness and is experientially capable of moving in and out of new situations. The person is relaxed and is capable of verbally and nonverbally understanding other people. Although the extent of the individual's skills and understanding may not be as deep as he or she feels them to be, the individual often regards him- or herself as an expert on the second culture. The sense of autonomy that the individual experiences stems, in part, from the ability to survive without cultural cues and props from the home culture and from the ability to experience new situations. The individual is a fully functioning person in his or her role and is both comfortable and secure with his or her status as an insider-outsider in two different cultures. The stage of autonomy is especially marked by the growth of personal flexibility and by the development of appropriate coping skills for the second culture.

*Independence*

The final stage of the transition is marked by attitudes, emotionality, and behaviors that are *independent* but not *undependent* of cultural influence. The individual is fully able to accept and draw nourishment from cultural differences and similarities, is capable of giving as well as illiciting a high degree of trust and sensitivity, and is able to view both him- or herself and others as individual human beings that are influenced by culture and upbringing. He or she is expressive, humorous, creative, and is capable of putting meaning into situations. The individual, then, is self-actualizing to the degree that both choice and responsibility are exercised in situations while also fully reexperiencing other emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal states marked in earlier stages of the transition. Most important, the individual is capable of undergoing further transitions in life along new dimensions and of finding new ways to explore the diversity of human beings. Where an individual is independent, he or she is capable of experiential learning that is holistically incorporated into identity, while at the same time capable of again having preconceptions, assumptions, values, and attitudes challenged.

The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self. The sequences of changes which take place between contact and independence are indicative of a progressive unfolding of the self. As Erikson (1964) suggests, "it must be remembered that all 'graduations' in human development mean the abandonment of a familiar position, and that all growth . . . must come to terms with this fact." The independence stage delineated in the model is not conceived of as a culmination. To the contrary, it is a state of dynamic tension in which self- and cultural discoveries have opened up the possibility of other depth experiences. As a gestalt, the transitional experience is a set of intensive and evocative situations in which the individual perceives and experiences other people in a distinctly new manner and, as a consequence, experiences new facets and dimensions of existence. The relationships between perception, emotion, and behavior in this gestalt experience are illustrated in Table 1.

If consciousness and awareness can be viewed as instrumental to personal growth, then several forms of understanding emerge from the transitional process. The individual experientially learns, for example, that every culture and its accompanying values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms are an intertwined fabric that has some degree of internal

Stage	Perception	Emotional Range	Behavior	Interpretation
Contact	differences are intriguing, perceptions are screened and selected	excitement stimulation euphoria playfulness discovery	curiosity interest assured impressionistic	The individual is insulated by his or her own culture. Differences as well as similarities provide rationalization for continuing confirmation of status, role, and identity.
Disintegration	differences are impactful, contrasted cultural reality cannot be screened out	confusion disorientation loss apathy isolation loneliness inadequacy	depression withdrawal	Cultural differences begin to intrude. Growing awareness of being different leads to loss of self-esteem. Individual experiences loss of cultural support ties and misreads new cultural cues.
Reintegration	differences are rejected	anger rage nervousness anxiety frustration	rebellion suspicion rejection hostility exclusive opinionated	Rejection of second culture causes preoccupation with likes and dislikes; differences are projected. Negative behavior, however, is a form of self-assertion and growing self-esteem.
Autonomy	differences and similarities are legitimized	self-assured relaxed warm empathic	assured controlled independent "old hand" confident	The individual is socially and linguistically capable of negotiating most new and different situations; he or she is assured of ability to survive new experiences.
Independence	differences and similarities are valued and significant	trust humor love full range of previous emotions	expressive creative actualizing	Social, psychological, and cultural differences are accepted and enjoyed. The individual is capable of exercising choice and responsibility and able to <i>create</i> meaning for situations.

cohesion. No one culture, therefore, is inherently better or worse than another since every culture is its own unique system for dealing with the question of being. There is no single scale for rating a successful or unsuccessful, good or bad culture. The individual then, also learns that all persons are, to some extent, culture-bound; they are products of the culture in which they have lived. Every culture provides the individual with some sense of identity, some regulation of behavior, and some sense of personal place in the scheme of things.

More directly, the transitional phenomenon gives rise to a heightened sense of self. The individual learns that behavior rises out of a complex of motivations and intentions that stem predominately from his or her cultural vocabulary. Feelings, and the ways in which the world is experienced, are reflected in the abilities to communicate, to enter interpersonal relationships, to perceive and deal with differences, and to behave in new situations for which there is no personal precedent.

## IMPLICATIONS

The transitional process which occurs in the cross-cultural experience is a depth experience. It marks the growth and development of personality along a number of dimensions. At the perceptual level, it represents the movement of personality through a *symbiotic* state of single reality awareness to a *differential* state whereby there is an awareness and acceptance of the interdependence of many realities. Emotionally, the transition marks the change from *dependence* on reinforcements to *independence*, while in the largest sense of self-concept, it is the change from a *monocultural* to an *intercultural* frame of reference. Significantly, transitional experiences can be essential to a working through of self-concept. The tensions and crises of change demand that the individual answer the confusions of life experiences with a reaffirmation of his or her uniqueness as an individual in relationship to others. The process of identity, suggests Erikson (1959), "expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others."

I do not claim that every individual who goes through significant change situations undergoes the learning, self-development, and personal growth outlined in this model. Obviously, there are far too many examples of failure, total withdrawal, breakdown, and complete inability to cope with new experiential demands. Anecdotal material



from multicultural organizations seems to suggest that Americans are particularly prone to "being shocked by culture" because they view themselves as being culture-free. Most Americans do not seem to realize that, despite their protean style of identity, they do have a culture which teaches the individual certain values and attitudes. Cultural adjustment is usually thought of as a field problem in adaptation (i.e., learning a language; being able to recognize the names of cities, foods, and historical persons; and having a working knowledge of the essential customs and habits of the people). These types of adjustments are not only technocratic in their emphasis on adaptive skills, but also harbor the hidden assumption that Americans can adjust to anything. Culture is too often viewed by Americans as something that foreigners have. Implicit in this attitude is the premise that whereas Asians, Africans, Latins, and Polynesians are "conditioned" by their culture, Americans are free from such conditioning because they are practical, objective, action-oriented individuals. It is possible, then, that Americans have more fundamental problems with cultural identity which become manifest in the transitional experience.

Most programs dealing with cross-cultural interaction have experienced some degree of (sometimes unexplainable) attrition. For many individuals, transitional experiences of any sort will always be more negative than positive, more harmful than helpful, and more destructive than constructive no matter what the degree of cultural dissimilarity. Yet, inherent in the model of the transitional experience is a possible framework for the development of training and simulation models that prepare people for change experiences. Implicit in the model is a possible framework for the development of counseling strategies that are developmental rather than adjustive. The model of the transitional experience also suggests the need for, and probable utility of, further empirical research on psychological aspects of assimilation, enculturation, and cross-cultural communication. Although this article does not address itself to the question of motivations, expectations, and anticipations that precede transitional experiences, the model may very well be applicable to research, training, and program development for predeparture orientation.

## CONCLUSION

Experience with exchange students, international volunteers, military and diplomatic personnel, and others engaged in cross-cultural experi-

ences suggests that transitional experiences are very often processes of both frustration and growth. The dynamics of the cross-cultural experience at the personal level represent the process of positive disintegration. Such experiences can occur whenever new environments of experience and perception are encountered. Although many different reactions and responses can take place in this confrontation of cultures, the greatest shock may be the encounter with one's own cultural heritage and the degree to which one is a product of it. In the encounter with another culture, the individual gains new experiential knowledge by coming to understand the roots of his or her own ethnocentrism and by gaining new perspectives and outlooks on the nature of culture. Throughout the transitional experience the individual is presented with differences and complexity. When differences cannot be ignored, they become distorted. This distortion gives rise to emotions that each person must come to understand experientially. In so doing, learning, self-awareness, and personal growth take place. Culture shock, as Hoopes and Althen (1971) and David (1971) have suggested, may very well be the way in which the individual reconfirms his or her own identity in the face of new linguistic, perceptual, emotional, and cultural learning.

The transitional experience is, finally, a journey into the self. Paradoxically, the more one is capable of experiencing new and different dimensions of human diversity, the more one learns of oneself. Such learning takes place when a person transcends the boundaries of ego, culture, and thinking. "If each man has his own unique horizon," writes Michael Novak (1970), "then the self-awareness of each must include a pervasive sense of the relativity of views of reality." As interactions across barriers of human existence increase, and as the world comes closer to the physical realities of "the global village," new understanding of change experiences will hopefully broaden the challenges to ethnocentrism, chauvinism, and nationalism.

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