

Expatriate Coping Strategies to Reduce Culture Shock

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Unfortunately, many expatriates struggle adapting to life in a foreign country. According to Dr. Livermore (2015), 16 to 40 percent of assignments are terminated early and 99 percent cite cultural issues as the primary reason. This can result in the loss of up to \$1.25 million per failed transfer (p. 18). Therefore, ensuring a successful cultural adjustment is a high priority for any organization considering foreign assignments. Hence, this paper will summarize potential causes of culture shock and coping strategies one may use to facilitate acculturation. Both key sources referenced (Winkelman, 1994; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008) address cultural shock using a cognitive-behavioral approach and comparable social learning theories. To include an element of intersectional awareness, I will also touch on additional measures recommended for diverse travelers by the U.S. State Department (2019).

Understanding Culture Shock

Winkelman (1994) defines culture shock as “a multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture” (p. 121). According to Zhou et al., perspectives on culture shock have evolved over the past century. For example, culture shock and adaptation have been analyzed using “grief and bereavement, locus of control, selective migration, expectancy-value, negative life-events, social support, value difference, and social learning” theories (2008, p. 64). Overall, most contemporary analyses have shifted away from the clinical perspective that culture shock requires medical treatment to instead view cross-cultural contact as a social learning experience (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 64). This is an important development which recognizes that not all cross-cultural contact results in diminished well-being. For example, Winkelman’s Phases of Culture Shock theory includes the first “honeymoon or tourist phase” which involves feelings of excitement and positive expectations about a new

culture (1994, p. 122). Thus, a positive mindset can buffer certain stressors and considerably change one's threshold to tolerate cultural differences. Therefore, simple cause and effect theories (i.e. new culture results in culture shock) may not be broadly applicable.

Still, with high financial risk pertaining to failed expatriate assignments, it is vital for organizations to understand the common causes of culture shock in order to prevent them. Winkelman details four causes: stress reactions, cognitive failures, role shock, and personal shock (1994, pp. 122-123). Stress reactions include the psychological and physiological responses attributed to stress experienced in a new environment (e.g. psychosomatic interactions leading to illness). Cognitive fatigue occurs when one feels overwhelmed consciously processing information that is usually processed unconsciously in their own culture (e.g. cataloguing and memorizing non-literal translations in a foreign language). Additionally, role shock and personal shock deal with the loss or dramatic shift in identity in relation to the social world. For example, ambiguous social positions (i.e. loss of privileges, outsider status) and loss of one's emotional support system can lead to depression or other mental health crises (Winkelman, 1994, pp. 122-123). It is important to emphasize that causes may not be obvious or may be attributed to the wrong stressor. Therefore, when developing coping strategies, it is important to also consider personal factors that may affect one's experience.

Cultural Adjustment Strategies

Both Winkelman (1994) and Zhou et al. (2008) view acculturation in terms of social learning. In particular, Zhou et al. describe cultural adaption using social psychology's ABC model. This model includes a "Stress and Coping" theory (affect), "Culture Learning" theory (behavior), and "Social Identification" theory (cognition; Zhou et al., 2008, p. 66). Furthermore, the strategies recommended by Winkelman (1994) can easily be sorted into this model. For

example, both suggest predeparture preparation where expatriates learn culturally relevant information (e.g. cultural and social interaction rules). Mastery of this behavior-approach can include speaking the language and anything related to elevating one's communicative skills. This is complimented by a cognitive awareness of the culture which can facilitate strong personal and social relations for expatriates (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 66). As identified by Winkelman, creating and maintaining one's unique bicultural identity is crucial to preventing culture shock caused by identity confusion (1994, p.124). However, perhaps most importantly is arming one's self with the proper stress and coping skills to prevent and mitigate potential issues. This includes ensuring the proper transitional adjustments related to one's physical well-being (e.g. ensuring physical needs will be met) and well as strategies to deal with psychological stressors (e.g. conflict resolution skills, identity maintenance). Overall, this prescriptive model is useful to identify an expatriate's acculturation strengths and weaknesses (Winkelman, 1994; Zhou et al., 2008).

However, though this model is theoretically comprehensive, both articles are written with a Western to non-Western (or non-Western to Western) transition in mind. Therefore, applicability to other acculturation scenarios is uncertain. Similarly, applicability to diverse, Western-based expatriates is also unclear or could falsely presume an easier adaption since they already possess bicultural (or multicultural) identities. Hence, while this model is a broad starting point, it remains vital to seek other sources that offer more targeted and practical advice. For example, the U.S. State Department publishes useful checklists and advisory notices on its website (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019). For example, under the "Traveler Information" section are pages dedicated to specific groups (e.g. faith-based travelers, journalists, LGBTQI

people, etc.). Overall, utilizing such resources is critical to building cultural cognitive awareness and developing essential coping strategies.

Conclusion

Hence, by utilizing the strategies listed above, expatriates and their families will be better prepared for their experience abroad. Not only is this important to ensure the personal well-being of the expatriate, but it can also prevent a significant financial loss for the organization. Therefore, diverse travelers should also use additional, targeted resources to increase their preparedness as specific causes of cultural shock will vary. Expatriates should also be careful to evaluate resource applicability as many articles target students preparing for study abroad experiences (e.g. Zhou et al.) or are written from a thoroughly westernized perspective (e.g. Winkelman). Furthermore, future research from an intersectional perspective should study success rates of coping strategies for diverse people (e.g. along the axes of race, class, and gender) which can be used to develop customized programs and ensure the success of diverse expatriates.

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