

Culture Stress

Perhaps the term *culture shock* is not the best to use since the word *shock* evokes images of an experience akin to an electric shock - something severe, but brief. Probably when first coined the term alluded to soldiers who, on the field of battle, experienced shell shock - a state which often lingered. However it is doubtful that most minds would automatically make this association today. Further the problem we are now discussing is more long-term and entrenched than often was the case with even shell shock.

Most technical terms carry excess baggage and *culture stress*, our preferred term, is no exception. The word *stress* has caused many to compare the effects of culture stress upon people with the kind of stress experienced by metals¹, and this has led to some misleading conclusions. A team from the University of Melbourne challenge this metaphor, pointing out that it is not helpful when applied to people. People are not like steel beams!² Another synonym for culture stress which is sometimes used is *culture fatigue*.

Stress is usually produced by significant change, and culture stress is the result of changing cultures. Marjorie Foyle takes it to mean "the reactions experienced on exchanging a familiar culture for an unfamiliar one."³ Hiebert explains, "Culture shock is the disorientation we experience when all the cultural maps and guidelines we learned as children no longer work. Stripped of our normal ways of coping with life, we are confused, afraid and angry. We rarely know what has gone wrong, much less what to do about it."⁴ Similarly, Elmer observes, "Culture shock is when you experience frustration from not knowing the rules of having the skills for adjusting to a new culture."⁵

Culture stress is the result of being deprived of those things we regard, or have regarded, as standard to our way of life.⁶ Lack of personal privacy can create considerable stress.⁷ Perceptions of wasted time, annoyance at inefficiency, perhaps adjusting to a simple lifestyle, dirt, unhygienic conditions, fear of germs, inadequate medical resources, illness and ailments, and frustrations in learning the language all add to this.⁸

Elmer remarks, "If we stop and think about it, we are always interpreting situations so we know how to act. If we cannot interpret a situation we do not know how to act, making us vulnerable to embarrassment, mistakes and even danger."⁹ This is illustrated by a Westerner, who after only two weeks in Tokyo, decided to get used to driving in the city. He was stopped by a furious policeman who shouted at him unintelligible sounds. The Westerner had been driving the wrong way down a

¹ For example, G.R. Collins, *Spotlight on Stress*. Venture: Vision House, 1983, 3.

² King, M., Stanley, G., & Burrows, G. *Stress: Theory and Practice* (Sydney: Gaine & Stratton, 1987).

³ *Honourably Wounded: Stress among Christian workers*. MARC Europe, 1987, 100.

⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985, 66.*

⁵ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections. Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World*. Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Academic, 2002, 44.

⁶ David Burnett, "How to Cope with Culture Shock" in *Prepared to Serve: A Practical Guide to Christian Service Overseas*. Ed. D. Williams; London: Scripture Union, 1989, 55.

⁷ Burnett gives the example of some wealthy Americans who were touring Scotland. They had booked into a certain Scottish hotel and were angered when the hotel would only give them shared bathrooms. They were used to having separate bathrooms. Burnett, "How to Cope", 56.

⁸ See Jim Chew's chapter on *Culture Stress in When You Cross Cultures. Vital Issues Facing Christian Missions*. Singapore: Navigators, 1993, 156ff.

⁹ *Cross-Cultural Connections*, 44.

one-way street without realising it. He hadn't recognised the sign. He went home emotionally exhausted from the experience.¹⁰ Culture stress results from not recognising the multitude of cultural signs that are taken for granted by members of the other culture, but must be learned, often from scratch, by the person new to the culture.

There are particular things that cause newcomers to feel helpless, clumsy and disoriented. Examples include:

- Not speaking the language well
- Not knowing routes or how to use public transport
- A lack of familiarity with a different currency and price structure
- Not knowing how to deal with issues such as banking, insurance, superannuation, taxation, car licensing and registration, medical needs, etc.
- The frustration of dealing with bureaucratic processes
- The difficulty of adjusting to the new climatic conditions
- The difficulty of adjusting to a new pace of life and developing a new structure for daily living
- The difficulty of adjusting to unfamiliar food and living conditions

Manifestations of culture stress include lethargy, loss of interest, depression, occasional disturbed sleep or excessive sleep, loss of appetite, poor concentration, hanging out only with one's friends, obsessing over missing favourite foods, craving for news from home, doubts about being in the new culture, wishing you were somewhere else, feeling physically ill (from the emotional stress), blaming others for one's negative feelings, reluctance to leave the house to socialize, excessive daydreaming about home, criticizing local people and their culture, a general sense of anxiety and discomfort, a sense of dread, fear, or paranoia, and spending enormous time on the phone or Internet with friends back home.¹¹ But fatigue is the commonest complaint.¹² Apathy sets in and is perhaps accompanied by a feeling that the person concerned has made a mistake in coming into the new cultural environment. Sometimes culture stress is manifested in reckless decision-making or in resentment and perhaps in a sense of being unjustly ignored and undervalued.

Culture stress is something which is *experienced*, with differing degrees of severity, by almost all people who find themselves placed in a different cultural context. An Indian migrant recalls the stress she experienced being in Australia: "I remember being in floods of tears because I had only seen two people on the street all day, or because the shops all shut at 5.00 pm!"¹³ Now this person had previously lived in Australia. She knew to expect this. Despite this she was not able to cope with the experience of being in what was for her a different cultural setting. Why not? Her reminiscence gives us some clue. She valued having people around her. She valued being able to do her shopping after 5pm. Australian culture did not reflect these values on a comparable scale.

Often, but not always, wives experience culture stress more acutely than their husbands. This is not so much because of any difference in emotional makeup, but because frequently husbands are more mobile than their wives in the new culture. Indeed in some cultural groupings women are so house-bound as to be virtually denied any real opportunity to come to terms with the new culture.

¹⁰ Burnett, "How to Cope", 55.

¹¹ Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, 47.

¹² Foyle, 105.

¹³ Devleena Ghosh. "The Losses and Gains of Living in Another Country" in *Where TO now? Australia's Identity in the Nineties*. Ed. Jeanette Beaumont; Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, 1993, 39.

Culture stress is an emotional phenomenon and recognition of this is important. It is misguided to think that if we *understood* how to behave then culture stress would not arise. Even anthropologists experience culture shock. So Kottak, reminiscing on his own experience among a tribe of indigenous Brazilians, comments:

“Brought up in one culture, intensely curious about others, anthropologists nevertheless experience culture shock, particularly on their first field trip. Culture shock refers to the whole set of feelings about living in an alien setting, and the ensuing reaction. It is a chilly, creepy feeling of alienation, of being without some of the most ordinary, trivial (and therefore basic) cues of one’s culture of origin.”¹⁴

We might have supposed that provided a person has been thoroughly prepared and oriented that they will cope well with the different culture. The truth is that it does not matter how well prepared a person might be to live in another cultural setting - they will still experience culture stress in all probability. As we have observed, the problem of culture stress is much more than one of a lack of knowledge as to how to behave in a different culture. It also involves the inescapable clash of values which will result from living in another culture. Popenoe reflects that one reason why even anthropologists experience culture shock is because “cultural attitudes are woven into so many aspects of daily life” and at the same time are very often “unconscious in character.” As a result “people don’t recognize that they hold specific cultural attitudes – until some common expectation is not met or some barely realized rule of conduct is violated.”¹⁵

Foyle observes:

Student nurses and doctors read books about operations and find them interesting. But when they actually go to see their first operation, and when the surgeon picks up the knife and blood begins to flow, theory becomes practical reality. As a result, some of them keel over in a dead faint. So with culture shock. Most missionaries have seen TV pictures of their future country, and have read books and magazines. In other words, they have studied the theory. When they actually arrive and see for themselves the local problems, and smell the results of dirt and disease, it all becomes reality and produces a sense of shock. I was once walking through an Asian bazaar with a doctor friend from England. To me it was normal; I had been there so long I saw nothing unusual in the typical bazaar street. But to my friend it was devastating. She had been working for years in public health, and kept saying, 'It's 1984, why is it still like this? Why don't they do something about it?' In the end I decided to take her out of the city and show her some of the more beautiful places of my host country as a means of more gentle introduction.¹⁶

Sometimes we are told that stress is a positive thing and that we must try not to eradicate stress but rather to channel it effectively and use it constructively. However when we speak of culture stress we are speaking not of a challenge which sets adrenalin flowing, but of a problem. If we overdo the idea that stress is a normal experience, and that culture stress is also the normal experience of those who are placed in different cultural settings, then we are in danger of saying much the same thing as

¹⁴ Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Anthropology. The Exploration of Human Diversity*. 8th edition; McGraw Hill, 2000, 12-13.

¹⁵ David Popenoe, *Sociology*. 2nd edition; Eaglewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974, 103

¹⁶ Foyle, 100.

that obesity is a necessary fact of life.¹⁷ So we must not dilute the notion of culture stress. "All people eat food, and yet all people are not obese..all people face challenges of some type each day, all people can imagine that their efforts might result in failure, but not all people suffer from stress."¹⁸ The same pertains to culture stress.

Jandt maintains that studies show 30-60% of expatriates suffer serious culture shock, while about 20% have no difficulty and enjoy the challenge.¹⁹

But it is crucial to remind ourselves that culture stress is normal and that virtually everyone experiences it to some degree or other when exposed to a different cultural situation. However, given the negative feelings and thoughts that accompany the experience of culture stress it is easy to see how Satan can distort our thinking. Elmer gives examples of how he might do this, leading us to erroneously conclude that our experience is due to our being abnormal or unspiritual. Perhaps a some Christians who are experiencing culture stress may think they have missed God's call or that God is punishing them or that they simply lack the skills for ministry. In this way Satan threatens to discourage us from getting involved in ministry and to rob us of the excitement of being in this new culture. We are held back from the spiritual growth and personal development that would result from responding to this experience in a godly manner. Maybe we find ourselves blaming others, whether the person who got us involved or the local people or even God. We end up focusing on ourselves, instead of the people we want to serve.²⁰

When a person is experiencing culture stress feelings of disorientation, disillusionment and depression are the norm rather than the exception. The frustration resulting from culture stress is so deep-seated that "even the most gracious and poised people can have uncharacteristic outbursts of anger when trying to adjust to various aspects of the new culture. The usual mechanism is that culture shock produces over anxiety, which is manifested by anger."²¹

While culture stress is a problem it may be a fully legitimate and proper response. For example, grief is a fully natural and proper response to the death of a loved one. But it is also a problem. The person who is suffering in this way needs comfort and to be treated with sensitivity, etc. There is a real sense in which grief is a natural and healthy response. However this aspect must not be overstressed so as to trivialise the problem faced by the mourner. So it is with culture stress which sometimes assumes the dimensions of grief.

Culture stress results from not having answers to even the most basic questions: Where can I post a letter? Is it OK to drink this? Do I shake hands with ladies? What does that gesture mean? What is that woman saying to me? Often the distressing thing for the person coming into the new cultural situation is the knowledge that even a child of the other culture can answer these questions, but the incomer can't. The person feels he or she has been reduced to the level of a child.²²

¹⁷ King et al., *Stress*, 3.

¹⁸ King et al., 3.

¹⁹ Fred E. Jandt, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication. Identities in a Global Community*. 5th edition; Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2007.

²⁰ Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, 45-46.

²¹ Foyle, 101.

²² Burnett, "How to Cope", 56.

Chew identifies the following defence mechanisms accompanying culture stress: denial (ignoring unpleasant emotions being experienced); suppression (not facing the inner cause of negative feelings); projection (finding fault with others, attributing to them the characteristics we can't accept in ourselves); rationalisation (avoiding the real reasons as to why something is unacceptable for us by formulating rational causes for our actions or reactions); withdrawal (unhealthy when this is not done for necessary rest and recuperation but as a refusal to relate with people, substituting other activities to compensate for a lack of motivation or feelings of failure).²³

There are many migrants who come to Australia and who never are placed in a situation where favourable winds of experience and explanation will blow away the fogs of their cultural confusion. And to the extent that cultural confusion persists it is very much a part of the ongoing experience of culture stress. Cultural confusion is actually a complex phenomenon. It is not simply the case that people need to know how to do various, relatively external, things in order to have done with cultural confusion. There often remains, and to some extent may always remain, an acute sense of awkwardness in knowing how to communicate matters of importance and perhaps delicacy to people from another cultural background, or knowing how to handle conflict or tension when it arises. Thus there is every reason for regarding cultural confusion as an essential and more-or-less permanent component of culture stress.

To the extent that culture stress is caused by cultural confusion, the level of anxiety associated with this is lessened by two things:

- (1) The ability to predict what constitutes appropriate behaviour.
- (2) Great confidence in a representative of the culture concerned who is ever available to guide, empathise with difficulties, and explain.

This ability to predict is in turn enabled by one of two things²⁴:

1. By controlling human behaviour - in much the same way as a chairman might run a meeting. But this is not usually a viable option for migrant peoples.
2. By making an educated guess as to what is appropriate behaviour on the basis of past experience. For migrant peoples this is basically the only option available for reducing the level of stress involved in coping with a different culture.

We can help people to lessen their cultural confusion by:

1. Allowing them to be in situations where legitimately they can be in control of what happens
2. Helping them to build up a bank of personal experience on the basis of which they will be able to confidently predict what constitutes appropriate behaviour.
3. By patiently comparing our culture with theirs and helping them to see what aspects of our cultural behaviour constitute functional equivalents to different behaviour in their culture
4. By helping them to understand the basic values which underly different cultural behaviour by so patently loving people and genuinely serving them that they come to trust us and treat us as those who, not paternalistically, but as equals and friends, can empathise with them in their difficulties and frustrations, and can help them to negotiate the intricacies of our own culture.

²³ *When You Cross Cultures*, 163-170.

²⁴ A.H. Bolyanatz, "How we reduced those early cultural surprises" in *Helping Missionaries Grow: Readings in Mental Health and Missions*. Eds. K.S. O'Donnell & M.L. O'Donnell; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1988, 330.

Several factors will militate together to determine the intensity or otherwise of the experience of culture stress. $CS = f(\text{Religious Beliefs, Unpredictability, Involvement, Value Differences, Frustration, Temperamental Differences, Added Stress Factors})$. The intensity of the experience of culture stress is reduced by various factors.²⁵ $CA = f(\text{Acceptance, Communication, Emotional Security, Inner Spiritual Resources})$ [CA is an abbreviation for *Cultural Adjustment*].

Most identify 3-4 distinct phases in the normal experience of a person as he or she relates to a particular culture over a long period of time: (1) Period of Fascination; (2) Period of Hostility; (3) Period of Acceptance; (4) Period of Adjustment.

One of the dimensions of culture stress is the frustration which results from the failure to achieve adequate progress; the failure to fulfil some desired goal. There are three ways of dealing with this frustration:

- (1) To find another way of reaching one's goal.
- (2) To change the goal completely.
- (3) To scale down the goal and set more realistic expectations.

When we encounter folk who are experiencing such culture related frustration then we can help them to think through on what they are hoping to achieve. At a practical level the following factors play an important part in preventing or addressing stress: building physical resources (diet, exercise, sleep, rest), pacing and planning, learning to know ourselves, learning to handle our emotions and attitudes, building self-esteem, deepening an appreciation of God's grace, and learning to handle weaknesses and limitations.²⁶

Ways we can help:

1. Help them to understand that culture stress is a normal experience.
2. Help them to see that is good for them to talk about what they are observing, thinking and feeling, remembering that some people tend to internalize what they are thinking and feeling, so that they might seem to be functioning well on the outside, when, in reality, they are not coping well at all.
3. Help them to recognise the manifestations of culture stress.
4. Help them to work out appropriate ways in which they can 'escape' from our culture from time to time.
5. Sometimes it is helpful to engage in a recreational activity with someone who is experiencing stress, preferably an activity which is healthy and is physically invigorating, such as doing exercise together, or participating in some sport together. However intense sporting endeavour and competitiveness are obviously counter-productive to relieving stress.
6. Help them to understand the values which underlie their own culture and those of the culture which is causing them stress.
7. Be a friend who unconditionally accepts and loves the person experiencing culture shock.
8. In a military context people tend to cope with stress better if their decisions are limited to a few well-learned drills. There are, however, some attendant problems: while such people may function better under stress, the drills might not include the best decisions, or even an

²⁵ T.W. Dye. "Stress-Producing Factors in Cultural Adjustment" in *Helping Missionaries Grow: Readings in Mental Health and Missions*. Eds. K.S. O'Donnell & M.L. O'Donnell; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1988, 336, 340-9.

²⁶ Chew, 176-188.

appropriate decision.²⁷ In helping people with culture stress it will often be good to help them to limit their decisions, provided they can be brought to accept that some decisions made on their behalf may be far from optimal.

QUESTIONS:

1. *Identify a time when you experienced culture stress?*
2. *How did this express itself in your life?*
3. *What helped you to deal with it?*

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²⁷ King et. al., 125.

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