

Navigating Intercultural Adaptation challenges: Key Strategies for Sojourners

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Abstract: *This study explores various intercultural adaptation challenges (from the perspective of culture shock) faced by sojourners and examines strategies to overcome these obstacles. It highlights the importance of empathy, openness, and continuous learning in fostering successful intercultural interactions. The study is theoretically guided by the framework for the study of intercultural adaptation developed by Furnham and Bochner (1986). They outline eight theoretical foundations for the study of intercultural adaptation: movement as loss, fatalism, selective migration, appropriate expectation, negative life events, social support, clash of values, and social skills deficit. Methodologically, this study used a documentary research method based on secondary sources. The findings underscore that sojourners face various intercultural adaptation challenges, such as culture shock, loss of familiar symbols and personal relationships due to geographical movement, as well as communication challenges. The study suggests two main models to guide sojourners in coping with these challenges: the dialectical model and the transformative learning model.*

Key words: Intercultural adaptation, sojourners, culture shock

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

Sojourners are moving all over the world from one country to another or from one place to another. When moving in they carry with themselves their thoughts, values, feelings behaviours, beliefs and language. Arriving in the host country they find the host population with different thoughts, values, feelings behaviours, beliefs and language from theirs. But they have no choice other than integrating the host community and share the host culture, briefly they have to align with the new standards(culture).

Some people who move to a foreign country adapt quickly to their new surroundings, while others struggle significantly. A major challenge for those who find it difficult is the sudden change in the familiar symbols and routines that shape their everyday lives. This disruption often causes them to consciously or unconsciously resist the new culture, as they find its ways uncomfortable. As a result, they may withdraw from social interactions, avoid engaging with the unfamiliar environment, and develop a fear of connecting with others. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:163)

This study therefore, explores various intercultural adaptation challenges faced by sojourners and examines strategies to overcome them. It highlights the importance of empathy, openness, and continuous learning in fostering successful intercultural interactions.

1.2. Research questions

- a) What are the intercultural adaptation challenges faced by sojourners?
- b) What are the strategies to overcome intercultural adaptation challenges faced by sojourners?

1.3. Research objectives

- a) Identify intercultural adaptation challenges faced by sojourners.
- b) Explore the strategies to overcome those challenges.

2. Literature review

In this section divided into two main parts, we are going to define the key words of this study in the first part named conceptual review, and thereafter we are going to briefly discuss the framework for the study of intercultural adaptation developed by Furnham& Bochner (1986) as a guiding theory in the second part named theoretical review.

a. Conceptual Review

Intercultural adaptation

Kim (1998) refers to intercultural adaptation as the process of increasing the level of fitness to meet the demand of the new cultural environment. In other words, intercultural adaptation is a process of dealing with mal adjustment within a host culture. Entrance in a new culture is generally accompanied by culture shock.

Sojourners

Sojourners typically refer to individuals who temporarily reside in a foreign country for a specific purpose, such as work, study, or travel. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005)

Culture shock

According to Furnham&Bochner, (1982) Culture shock occurs in social encounter, social situations, social episodes or social transactions between sojourners and host nationals, and it is the reaction of sojourners to problem encountered in the dealings with host members.

Forms of culture shock

Culture shock manifests in various forms, as outlined by Chen and Starosta (2005). These include:

1. **Language Shock:** Described by Smalley (1963), this occurs when individuals struggle with the unfamiliar host language, leading to difficulty adapting to the new symbolic environment.
2. **Role Shock:** Higbee (1969) explains this as the sense of losing personal status in an uncertain environment. Sojourners must adapt their roles to function effectively in the host culture.
3. **Transition Shock:** According to Bennett (1977), this is the emotional strain caused by adjusting to the numerous changes required in the new culture, comparable to experiences like losing a loved one, divorce, or relocation.
4. **Culture Fatigue:** Guthrie (1975) highlights this as physical or psychological discomfort faced by sojourners while trying to adapt to the host culture.
5. **Education Shock:** Hoff (1979) attributes this to international students adapting to a new and often stressful academic environment.
6. **Adjustment Stress:** Smith (1955) and Barna (1983) describe this as physical tension signaling readiness to confront challenges in the host culture.
7. **Culture Distance:** As identified by Babiker, Cox, and Miller (1980), this refers to the psychological distress, estrangement, and alienation felt due to differences between the sojourners' culture and the host culture.

b) Theoretical Review

Theoretical foundation for the study of Intercultural adaptation

According to Furnham & Bochner (1986) there are 8 theoretical foundations for the study of intercultural adaptation namely: Movement as loss, Fatalism, Selective migration, Appropriate expectation, Negative life events, social support, Clash of values, and social skills deficit.

1. **Movement as loss:** The view of this movement is simply the loss of familiar symbols and personal relationship due to geographical movement. This feeling of loss is a cause of culture shock reflected in a range of psychological symptoms such as grief and mourning.
- 2) **The approach of fatalism** suggests that many cultures are oriented to fatalistic beliefs in which people lack the final control over the results of their behaviors.
- 3) **The selective migration perspective** suggests that the sojourners who can adjust easily to the effects of culture shock become the prevailing types in the host culture. The coping strategies used by the fittest sojourners can be used to help the new sojourners or those who are less successful in the process of adaptation.
- 4) **The appropriate expectations approach** argues that the degree of adaptation we may achieve can be evaluated by our expectations about living and possibilities of success in the host culture.

5) The negative life events perspective underline that any change in our daily life will cause a certain degree of physical and psychological discomfort. So, living in a new environment must cause a certain change in our life. So, the speed of intercultural adaptation depends on the way sojourners are coping with stress and strain caused by drastic change.

6) The social support approach explains that when we move to a new culture, we suddenly loose many sources of social support. Providing necessary social support is an effective way to reduce psychological and mental problems as well as physical stress in the process of intercultural adaptation.

7) The clash of values approach suggests that certain value orientation such as self-help and stoicism help sojourners easily adapt to the host culture.

8) The social skills deficit emphasizes that persons who cannot adjust to the social conventions in their society will not adjust well to a new environment either.

Stages of intercultural adaptation

There are two popular models to explain the developmental stages of Intercultural Adaptation. U-CURVE and W-CURVE

U-curve describes the process of re-entry (reverse culture shock) and W-curve represent the pattern of sojourners' readjustment to their own culture. In other words, U-Curve pattern stands for the process of entering the host culture and W-Curve pattern comes in when sojourners return back to their own culture.

1. U-Curve pattern

Generally, the U-Curve pattern comprises four main steps namely honeymoon period, crisis period, adjustment period and bicultural period (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:173)

a) Honeymoon period

This initial stage of intercultural adaptation is marked by a sense of wonder and enthusiasm for the new culture. Sojourners are captivated by the novelty of their surroundings and the fresh experiences they encounter. During this phase, they often interpret the new environment through the lens of their own culture. Their curiosity sparks feelings of joy and exhilaration as they notice both the commonalities and contrasts between their original culture and the one they are adapting to.

b) Crisis period

Often referred to as the hostility or frustration stage, this phase of cultural adaptation forces sojourners to confront the challenges of the new culture on a daily basis. It is marked by confusion and a sense of disorientation as they grapple with stark differences in values, beliefs, behaviors, and ways of life. This stage can feel overwhelming, as the contrast between their familiar norms and the host culture becomes more apparent.

c) Adjustment period

The adjustment period marks a turning point in cultural adaptation, as sojourners begin to overcome the challenges faced during the crisis stage. They gradually develop strategies to navigate the new environment effectively, learning to align their behavior with the social and cultural norms of the host country. Thomas and Althen (1989) describe this phase as the recovery stage, where individuals start to value and respect the new culture while becoming more attuned to and sensitive toward cultural differences

d) Bicultural period

The bicultural period, also known as the mastery stage, represents the final phase of the U-Curve model. While sojourners may still encounter moments of anxiety and frustration, they have developed a deep understanding of the host culture. This allows them to participate in work, social activities, and leisure with a genuine sense of enjoyment, signaling their ability to navigate both cultures with confidence.

2. W-Curve pattern

When sojourners choose to stay in the host country, their cultural adaptation often concludes with the U-Curve model. However, those returning to their home countries encounter a similar adjustment process, known as reentry or reverse culture shock. Gullahorn (1963, 1966) expanded upon the U-Curve to propose the W-Curve model, which captures the stages of readjustment to one's native culture. According to this model, sojourners must once again navigate the four phases of the U-Curve upon returning home. Although the transition tends to be less intense and faster, culture shock remains an unavoidable part of the experience.

Adler (1975) outlined five stages of intercultural adaptation: **contact**, where individuals remain immersed in their own cultural identity and self-esteem is high; **disintegration**, as cultural differences begin to surface and self-esteem diminishes; **reintegration**, where individuals react to these differences by expressing either positive or negative attitudes, sometimes as a means of reclaiming self-esteem; **autonomy**, where they gradually learn to negotiate cultural differences and adapt to their surroundings; and finally, **independence**, where they embrace cultural diversity and construct new meanings for their experiences.

3. Methodology

In this study, we identified the various intercultural adaptation challenges faced by sojourners and examined different strategies to overcome them. We collected data from secondary sources, including published books, peer-reviewed articles, and reliable online databases that comprehensively cover our topic. By analyzing these sources, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the key issues and effective solutions for facilitating successful intercultural adaptation.

4. Results

The findings reveal that sojourners encounter a variety of intercultural adaptation challenges. Anderson (1994) highlighted several issues, including:

1. Conflicts arising from cultural differences, particularly in values, attitudes, and beliefs between the home and host cultures.
2. A sense of loss due to the absence of familiar cultural symbols that shape their identity.
3. Social ineptitude stemming from difficulties in developing perceptual sensitivity and behavioral flexibility in the host culture.
4. Cultural barriers such as presuming similarities between cultures, language challenges, misinterpreting nonverbal cues, and dealing with preconceptions and stereotypes.

Furnham and Bochner (1982) identified additional challenges that sojourners often face, including:

1. Forming friendships with host peers.
2. Managing interactions with individuals who are angry or confrontational.
3. Initiating conversations and building relationships.
4. Speaking or presenting in public settings.
5. Developing meaningful connections with host nationals.
6. Grasping jokes, humor, and sarcasm in the new culture.
7. Handling attention from host nationals who may stare at them.
8. Keeping conversations flowing during interactions.
9. Spending time with unfamiliar host nationals.
10. Addressing unsatisfactory experiences or voicing complaints in the host culture.

These challenges underline the complexities of adapting to a new cultural environment.

Anderson (1994) presents strategies for overcoming intercultural adaptation challenges through his dialectical model, emphasizing that adaptation is a cyclical and ongoing process. Sojourners repeatedly face problems and obstacles rooted in their interactions with the host culture, and the ways they choose to address these challenges shape their unique paths of adjustment. Their proactive efforts to engage with the new culture can result in profound transformation, often described as a "rebirth." Motivation plays a crucial role in this process, serving as the driving force that propels individuals toward successful adaptation. Without sufficient motivation, the instability and imbalance experienced during adaptation can hinder their ability to respond effectively to cultural differences. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:175)

Anderson's model emphasizes six core principles of intercultural adaptation. First, it is seen as a motivated, goal-driven process, where sojourners actively learn to adjust to the host culture. Second, adaptation is reciprocal and interdependent, requiring sojourners to address challenges and cultural barriers by understanding the context and developing effective problem-solving strategies.

According to Anderson (1994), sojourners have four possible responses to these challenges: they can change the environment, change themselves, remain passive by doing nothing, or withdraw entirely from the environment. However, if they opt to change the environment or themselves, they must engage in a learning process. For example, if language proves to be a barrier, sojourners might choose to adapt by studying and mastering the host culture's language. This illustrates how learning is central to overcoming adaptation challenges. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:177)

Third, intercultural adaptation involves a relationship between the sojourner as a "stranger" and the host culture. According to Gudykunst and Hummer (1987) and Gudykunst and Kim (1992), sojourners are considered strangers in the host land. As such, the adaptation process unfolds within this context, requiring sojourners to adjust their thought patterns and behaviors to align with the cultural framework of the host society.

Fourth, intercultural adaptation is an ongoing, cyclical, and interactive process. It is dynamic and multi-faceted, involving the interplay of three key dimensions: affective (emotions), cognitive (thoughts), and behavioral (actions). Sojourners' responses to these dimensions shape their adaptation journey as they simultaneously influence their environment and are influenced by it. This continuous interaction highlights the adaptive process as one of facing and addressing challenges in the new cultural setting. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:177)

The cyclical nature of the process reflects the repeated emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the challenges encountered during adaptation. By continually addressing these obstacles, sojourners may ultimately succeed in integrating into the host culture and break free from the recurring cycle of challenges and responses. This successful integration allows them to become bicultural. However, if they are unable to develop effective and appropriate solutions to the obstacles, they may either choose to return to their home culture as "returnees" or avoid engaging with the challenges altogether, becoming "escapers." (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:177).

Fifth, intercultural adaptation is a continuous process. For sojourners, full adaptation remains elusive, as they cannot completely replicate the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral traits of host nationals. The process necessitates ongoing learning and growth, with the understanding that no matter how much they adapt, they will always maintain some level of distinction from the host culture.

Sixth, intercultural adaptation entails personal growth. Adjusting to life in a new cultural environment represents a transformative experience, requiring sojourners to devise effective strategies to overcome challenges presented by the new culture. This journey of adaptation fosters affective, cognitive, and behavioral development, enabling them to align more closely with the lifestyle of their new surroundings. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:177)

Taylor (1994) introduced the transformative learning model to explain intercultural adaptation as a transformative journey where sojourners evolve from newcomers to competent communicators in the host culture. This model examines the changes individuals experience by analyzing how they interpret their interactions within the host culture, ultimately enabling them to achieve understanding, appreciation, and respect.

Instrumental learning, as highlighted by Chen and Starosta (2005), plays a crucial role by relying on empirical discovery. It involves sojourners addressing task-oriented challenges and understanding how the host culture interprets cause-and-effect relationships.

Taylor's model encompasses three key dimensions:

1. **Precondition to Change:** Referring to the factors that prepare individuals for transformation, this stage identifies culture shock as a catalyst for growth. Sojourners work to regain their internal equilibrium by managing the cultural challenges encountered in the host environment.
2. **Process Dimension:** Representing the steps and experiences that facilitate adaptation, Mezirow (1991) outlines ten (10) transformational stages:
 1. Disorienting dilemma
 2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
 3. Critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
 4. Recognition of shared experiences of discontent and transformation
 5. Exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions
 6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing plans
8. Provisional adoption of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. Reintegration into one's life based on new perspectives

In this sequence, phase 1 (disorienting dilemma) serves as the precondition for transformation, while phases 2 through 8 constitute the process dimension.

3. **Outcome Dimension:** Referring to the results of intercultural competency, phases 9 (building competence and self-confidence) and 10 (reintegration based on new perspectives) signify the successful culmination of adaptation. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:179)

Hummer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978) examined strategies for sojourners to manage culture shock and the psychological stress it brings. They identified eight (8) key challenges that individuals often face during this process:

1. Frustration: Coping with obstacles and misunderstandings in the new environment.
2. Stress: Managing the emotional strain of adapting to unfamiliar circumstances.
3. Anxiety: Dealing with feelings of uncertainty and apprehension in the host culture.
4. Different political systems: Understanding and navigating political structures that may differ significantly from those in their home culture.
5. Pressure to conform: Balancing the desire to integrate with maintaining one's cultural identity.
6. Social alienation: Overcoming feelings of isolation and detachment from the host society.
7. Financial difficulties: Managing monetary challenges in an unfamiliar economic landscape.
8. Interpersonal conflicts: Resolving misunderstandings and clashes in cross-cultural interactions. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:165)

Oberg (1960) observed that during the frustration phase of culture shock, sojourners may respond in two ways. They might reject the unfamiliar environment that causes their discomfort, distancing themselves from the host culture. Alternatively, they may mentally retreat to their own culture, perceiving it as superior and finding everything from their home culture more appealing or significant than what the host culture offers. This mental regression can serve as a coping mechanism to restore a sense of stability and familiarity amidst the challenges of cultural adaptation. (Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. 2005:165)

Kohls (1984) proposed five key strategies for managing reverse culture shock upon returning to one's home country:

1. Share your experiences abroad with understanding friends or relatives, making sure to do so without appearing boastful.
2. Take on the perspective of a foreigner temporarily by asking questions about your home culture, similar to how you inquired about the host culture when you first arrived there.
3. Seek the help of a friend to catch up on what changed while you were away, such as new slang, technological advancements, music, and social trends.

4. Join various social groups, such as religious organizations, clubs, or professional associations, to immerse yourself in and learn more about your original culture.
5. Connect with individuals from your own culture who have also had international experiences or engage with foreign nationals, as they can relate to and share insights about the transitions you've gone through.

5. Conclusion

This study delves into the intricate and multifaceted challenges faced by sojourners as they adapt to new cultural environments. These challenges, including culture shock, the loss of familiar symbols, and social and communication barriers, often make it difficult for sojourners to integrate seamlessly into a different culture. Nevertheless, these obstacles can be surmounted through strategies that emphasize empathy, openness, continuous learning, and personal growth.

Theoretical frameworks proposed by Furnham and Bochner (1986), along with intercultural adaptation models like the U-Curve and W-Curve, shed light on the various stages of adaptation and re-entry that sojourners go through. By understanding these stages and the specific hurdles they present, sojourners can adopt effective strategies such as adjusting their expectations, seeking social support, and embracing a mindset focused on learning and growth to facilitate their cultural integration.

Additionally, the dialectical and transformative learning models offer practical advice on how sojourners can actively manage their cultural transitions. While the process of intercultural adaptation is undoubtedly challenging, it also presents opportunities for personal development, deeper cultural understanding, and the enhancement of intercultural competence.

Ultimately, the success of intercultural adaptation hinges on the sojourner's willingness to engage with the host culture, learn from their experiences, and adjust their behavior to align with new cultural norms. By acknowledging the challenges and implementing the strategies discussed, sojourners can foster meaningful interactions, overcome cultural barriers, and thrive in their new environments.

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