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Learning Intercultural Competency through International Immersion Travel

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by

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Abstract

Growing informational technology and international business alongside the speed of travel, have facilitated intercultural contact and increased the need for intercultural competency. As the world shrinks there are less defined lines between "us" and "them" and there is an increased need to look beyond our differences and focus on genuine human similarities. Intercultural competency is the ability to interact and communicate with another culture without violating valued social norms. Intercultural competency is preceded by a process of exposure and adaptation to new environments. Intercultural exposure is easily facilitated by international travel. Experiences abroad can be divided into two categories, quality and quantity. It has been suggested that the type of international travel rather than quantity of time spent abroad influences intercultural adaptation. The focus of this paper is to propose long term international travel as an important part of achieving intercultural competency. It is theorized that there is a progressive process that moves a person from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Understanding the way in which one learns to move through this process is an important part of identifying how one becomes interculturally competent. It is essential to recognize factors specific to the individual as well as the cultures and societies they are moving between. It has been found that people who successfully adapt interculturally to become bicultural or multicultural have high correlations with extroversion, creativity, restraint and intellect. Other studies suggest that there is a higher level of cognitive complexity among bicultural or multicultural persons opposed to monocultural persons.

Introduction

Increased global interconnectivity has created the need for improved intercultural competency. Unfortunately, many sojourners are unsuccessful in their attempts to adapt and integrate into the local setting. Literature has suggested that more than one third of all Americans who relocate to other countries return early due to a lack of ability to adapt to daily life (Taylor, 1994).

Growing informational technology and international business alongside the speed of travel have facilitated intercultural contact and increased the need for intercultural competency (Chen et al. 2015). Travel for pleasure, military relocation, student exchange, natural disasters, political refuge, economic need and social betterment all contribute in initiating globalization. As a result, the world seems to be minimizing the distance between cultures and increasing awareness of the world as a whole (Kim, Young Yun, 2000).

Regardless of individual motive for sojourn there is a common need to be able to get along with the host population and successfully navigate through one's daily tasks yet many people struggle with these skills (Storti, 2011). Culture shock often accompanies the initial struggle to integrate one's self into an unfamiliar culture. In order to increase effectiveness of cultural integration it is important to understand the process of learning to be culturally competent (Taylor, 1994).

This paper will define terms used to communicate central concepts discussed in order to give a universal understanding of the language employed. Subsequently, the

central themes of cultural competency, globalization, types of intercultural exposure as well as the theories used to support the proposed argument will be discussed. The focus of this paper is to propose long term international travel as an important piece in the puzzle to achieving intercultural competency.

Personal Theoretical Stance

Although traveling and intercultural competence is important for everyone, this paper's discourse is primarily aimed at the majority culture here in the United States, that of the white middle class. There is a level of privilege that comes along with being a member of the majority culture, but it is often difficult for people to acknowledge this privilege. Although challenging, the up side is individual growth which is promoted by self-exploration. The ability to reflect on one's beliefs and perspectives also allows for growth of personal relationships and the ability to promote equity. The subjects of diversity and social justice can be tough to approach but there is an unquestionable disparity between races here in the United States. Those of the majority culture are often resistant to reflect on their beliefs and existing cultural perspectives. This type of reflection can feel emotionally exhausting and threatening. Recognition of one's place of privilege may encourage recognition of the negative aspects of privilege such as the participation of the systematic oppression of others. There is rarely a need for reassessment of what is "normal" because the norm is created by the majority culture. This often leads to the labeling of oppressed minority groups as the ones who are "different." When one is part of the norm the importance of cultural identity may not seem to matter very much,

consequently there seems to be no need to reflect on how cultural identity impacts their own life. International immersion travel does not allow for the avoidance of self-reflection or questioning of one's existing meaning perspectives. It may even introduce the importance of cultural identity if that was not previously recognized. The benefits of doing so include enhancing one's personal development, improving one's relationships with others, and generally becoming better world citizens.

Literature Review

Studies have repeatedly shown that human beings are social creatures and live most aspects of life within a group context. For example, we generally go to school, work and live in groups rather than alone. Group membership helps shape one's attitudes, values, beliefs, outlook on the world and self-identity (Bochner, 2013; Kim, 2000). More often than not a person will identify as a member of various groups. Difficulties arise when groups place opposing demands on the individual (Bochner, 2013). The homogeneity or heterogeneity of one's home society can have an effect on the level of shock one experiences in an unfamiliar situation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005: P. 171). It is suggested that there is a key difference between contact amongst culturally or ethnically different groups occurring within the same society. Race, skin color and language are often used as identifiers as to the individual's group affiliation creating a distinction between "them" and us.

There is an additional factor involved with between society contact. Being the visitor/stranger in the situation versus the native/host will influence an individual's experience. Often differences between groups are amplified and distorted when there is a lack of interaction or experience, which creates negative stereotypes and discriminatory

behavior. The level of acceptance a visitor/stranger receives will depend on the host culture's existing ideas about the stranger's home country, culture, or skin color. Outgroup members may be excused from strict expectations if it is a short term interaction and there is no way that the out grouper could have fully adapted. This temporary "pass" of acceptance is contingent on the ability of the stranger/visitor to be inoffensive and respectful of the host culture even if it is not fully understood. Positive intergroup relations are increased by the recognition of a mutual goal or similarity.

Globalization

As the world shrinks there are less defined lines between "us" and "them" and there is an increased need to look beyond our differences and focus on genuine human similarities (Kim, Young Yun, 2000). Globalization and multiculturalism encourage the identification of mutual goals or similarities between people of different cultures. Globalization promotes acculturation which may occur among immigrants, sojourners and majority group members alike as a result of cross cultural contact. Immigrant based acculturation requires the ability to manage one's identification with both ethnic and host culture in order to successfully function in the local context (Chen et al. 2015). Global orientations are facilitated by proactive efforts to acquire elements of culture such as language, tradition, customs and norms of said culture (Chen et al. 2015). Research suggests that foreign language learners excel in the acculturation process abroad due to an increased ability to communicate with the host culture. When one is able to speak the host

language they seem to stand out as outsiders less gaining a deeper level of integration into

the host culture (Shiri, 2015).

Globalization is comprised of many elements including modernization, which refers

to transitioning from a traditional society to a modern one involving advanced technologies

and changes in social structure. Westernization, which encompasses the adoption of

western values, industry, technologies and lifestyle is a contributor to globalization.

Americanization is a factor affecting globalization where the focus lays on the impact of

American culture on others. This term often evokes thoughts of the economically advanced

and powerful U.S. using political power to impose western culture on others (Chen et al.

2015). It should be noted that people from eastern and western cultures, and both minority

and majority groups within a society are affected by global changes created by immigration

and globalization (Chen et al. 2015). Although globalization affects the world as a whole,

the effects of westernization and Americanization are felt mostly by the countries being

influenced by western culture.

Integration of new ideas requires intention and effort (Chen et al. 2015). When we

encounter people or situations that are different from what we know it is difficult to adapt.

This requires a change in the way that we think, feel or behave. Difference asks us to

change and adapt whereas sameness is easy. When we are surrounded with what we are

familiar and comfortable with we already know what to do and how to act in these

situations. Therefore, it is easier to seek out the things that are constant and regular to us,

but we do not grow without change. Change of one's self and the building of commonalities

requires one to choose to see and seek out bridges to connect with others instead of

building walls to keep out the diversities. Common unities might be found in proximity, ideology or shared experiences among different people.

Our attention is trained to focus on a given perspective through experience, meaning that if we choose to focus on the difference between people that is what our attention will be pulled towards. Furthermore, identifying similarities and distinctions between new cultures and one's home culture encourages adaptation to individual challenges.

It is suggested that effective adaptation and subsequent bicultural or multiculturalism fosters psychological health (Chen et al. 2015) Those choosing to utilize a proactive approach to globalization tend to be prepared to interact with the world using linguistic and cultural competence. These skills are applicable in various areas of life which lead to superior adjustment i.e. higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and life satisfaction (Chen et al. 2015). Those operating under a defensive approach tend to have higher stress, depression, and anxiety due to poorer adaptation. This could result from a lack of competence in interacting with the people, ideas or information from another culture. (Chen et al. 2015)

Travel

As our world becomes more interconnected, an increasing number of companies and universities are promoting international experience as a way to expand one's world view. Studies have shown that the type of international experience rather than the frequency of international travel will influence the level of cross-cultural adaptability. Past literature often used the term "international experience" without making clear what type of

experience was being referenced. For example, simply saying cross-cultural contact will facilitate intercultural competency does not qualify the type or length of "cross-cultural contact."

International experience can be divided into two categories, quality and quantity. Social psychologists have suggested that cognitive change comes from an interaction and involvement with one's environment such as work or school activities. Greater learning comes from deeper involvement in one's local setting. In many cases when entering a new culture our ideas about this culture are skewed. As involvement increases we will amend these ideas to fit reality which will increase our adaptability (Chang, W.-W., Yuan, Y.-H., & Chuang, Y.-T. 2013).

Motives to travel outside of our home location vary. Common examples include professional interest, study abroad or bragging rights back home. Natural disasters, political refuge, economic need and social betterment are also contributors in initiating relocation. The majority of international tourists visit resorts that allow for the opportunity to sample different foods and witness new customs. There is rarely a need for change in mental structure or behavior (Chang, W.-W., Yuan, Y.-H., & Chuang, Y.-T. 2013). As Kim states (2000)

> "Unlike immigrants, most short time sojourners tend to limit their contacts with
> their host cultures to peripheral areas- they have crossed cultures primarily to
> pursue a vocation, obtain a degree or enhance their prestige in the eyes of the folks
> at home. Their reasons for sojourning are specific and narrowly defined requiring
> less commitment to the host environment." (Kim, Young Yun, 2000: P. 4).

On the other hand, those traveling for extended work or education need to complete daily tasks in their new environment. In order to do so successfully it is necessary to expand or alter their existing cultural schemas to be more open and inclusive (Chang, W.-W., Yuan, Y.-H., & Chuang, Y.-T. 2013). Without including viewpoints from the current cultural context they will be unable to complete daily tasks with ease.

The level of social involvement while abroad is important to quality of exposure. Tourists are not often asked to be deeply involved in the host culture whereas students or workers are asked for more involvement. Learning at a more profound level often requires our current schemas to be disrupted on a deeper level which can come from the shock of a new culture (Chang, Yuan, & Chuang, 2013; Kim, 2000). When our habitual routines do not produce the results we are accustomed to our schemas become disrupted. Physically being abroad will facilitate the opportunity to achieve cultural competency, although one's individual mission and desire to interact on a thoughtful level will lead to the adaptation process (Chang, W.-W., Yuan, Y.-H., & Chuang, Y.-T. 2013). The quantity of travel, or simple time spent abroad, may not affect one's openness, flexibility or desire to adapt to another culture. Those having greater social involvement such as working in the community on a daily basis during their experience show greater adaptability (Chang et al., 2013).

Multicultural Acquisition

Cultural adaptation refers to the time it takes a person to adjust to a new culture along with the various emotions that arise during this time of change and uncertainty. This adaptation into a new culture encourages the practice of a set of harmonious behaviors, attitudes and guidelines that come together in a system and allow that system to function

successfully within an intercultural context. This is referred to as intercultural competency (Bochner, 2013; Chang et al., 2013). To reach a state of intercultural competence one must acquire the ability to communicate efficiently and appropriately with people of other cultures within valued conventions, customs or expectations of that culture (Bochner, 2013; Kim, 2000).

Those crossing cultural boundaries experience difficulty as they move away from the comfortable surroundings of what is known to them into an unknown and uncomfortable environment. Along with the new environment come feelings of inadequacy and frustration or social isolation. This buzz of emotional confusion is referred to as culture shock (Ward et al. 2005). Experiencing culture shock can lead one to be compelled to change the way of performing habitual tasks and daily activities in order to fit the demands of the current environment. Resisting and seeking out old comforts of their known culture is a typical defensive reaction when facing culture shock.

Culture shock may promote cultural retention and holding tight to the belief that one's culture is superior to others, adhering to one's cultural norms regardless of cultural context (Chang et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2016). This defensive response produces uneasy feelings in cultural interactions and set beliefs about cultural groups. Given this response, there would be a lack of desire to acquire a second language in order to promote cross cultural communication (Chen et al. 2015). People who are inclined to respond this way tend to have conventional views and support ethnocentrism holding on to prejudice against persons different from themselves (Bennett, M. J. 2004). Studies have shown that prevention focus and conservatism are positively correlated with the defensive response of

ethnic protection and negatively correlated with personality traits of extroversion, intellect, openness to experience and self-esteem (Chen et al. 2015). These people are unwilling to leave their comfort zone to embrace novelty and tend to react with an in-group and protective mindset rather than viewing out-group exchanges with rational thought (Chen et al. 2015).

A proactive approach to migration encourages a positive view of other cultures and a desire to understand the behaviors and practices of these cultures. Studies have suggested that this attitude fosters tolerance of immigrants and minorities by the dominate culture. Cultural minorities were reported to observe less discrimination than those operating under a defensive approach (Chen et al. 2015). In the defensive approach there is a spontaneous reaction to the unfamiliar which is to reject different cultural behaviors and practices. Crossing cultural boundaries allows people to view themselves and others in a new light. The object of this paper is to promote appreciation of cultural differences rather than simply a tolerance. Seeking out experience in other cultures as well as recognition and appreciation of cultural differences guides us toward multicultural acquisition (Chen et al. 2015) which will allow for a better understanding of one's self and others. The proactive approach to globalization often includes one's attempt to become bilingually proficient in order to promote communication across cultures (Chen et al. 2015).

When discussing multicultural acquisition, it is important to consider one's ability to adapt interculturally. Interdisciplinary discussions of cultural adaptation have involved the notion of mental well-being or mental illness to attribute the successful adaptation process (Ward et al. 2005 p 247). Others have suggested that the difficulties encountered are

simply part of the transition process (Kim, 2000). It has been argued that one's ability to adapt interculturally should take into consideration a combination of psychological, social cultural and demographic aspects (Kim, 2000).

Personality

Considering personality as a factor in the acculturation process, it is suggested that lower acculturative stress and enhanced adjustment occurs when the individual has positive attitudes toward the native host culture and participates in both (Chen et al. 2015). Openness to new experience is a positive predictor for operating under a proactive approach. The ability to be open to new experience requires imagination, creativity, knowledge, and intellect (Bochner, 2013; Chang et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2016; Kim, 2000). Interaction with other cultures has been linked to increase in the cognitive elements available for processing novel ideas (Chen et al., 2016). It may also promote the growth of the behavioral catalogue one has available to reference (Chen et al., 2016; Kim, 2000). A holistic global consideration is supported by a complex and inclusive cognitive structure (Chen et al. 2015). Openness to experience, extroversion, restraint and intellect are all positively correlated with multicultural acquisition (Chen et al. 2015). Bicultural acquisition allows for individuals to be able to choose appropriate behaviors according to situational prompts while monocultural persons tend to have more stagnant identities that do not incorporate or change as a result of multicultural exposure (Chen et al. 2015).

Traditionally anthropologists have led inquiries with a focus on the coming together of societies with differing cultural practices. There has also been a focus in anthropology toward personality traits and values of a culture and how those might change

from contact with another culture. It has been suggested that there is a breakdown of the existing structure of one's personality that occurs during a transition (Kim, 2000). Sociological studies have focused on stratification, the uneven distribution of power and resources within a culture. Many of these studies have investigated minority/majority relations. Particularly the structural integration of the minority group into the systems of the majority environment (Kim, 2000). Sociologists and anthropologist have tended to focused on the structural issues of immigrant groups which leads to a macro level focus.

Social psychologists have traditionally placed focus on intrapersonal interactions and introspection of the individual when confronted with unknown situations. In these studies, the structural conditions of the receiving environment are ignored. i.e. the status of the newcomers ethnic group and how that group is viewed by the native population (Kim, 2000). Across social science disciplines the focus varies but rarely includes a discussion of both macro and micro level components. Within the micro level studies there has been a division between studies of immigrants living in a new culture somewhat permanently and sojourners adapting to a temporary change in environment. As an immigrant one is more likely to commit to adaptation than a short time sojourner. The host culture tends to be more forgiving of culturally inappropriate mistakes made by a short time sojourner than a permanent immigrant as long as there is an interest and respect shown for the culture. With increased time in the host culture the native population will expect a higher level of cultural competency. In both cases, short and long term, there is a level of challenge in adapting to the new environment (Kim, 2000). There is often an additional adaptation period when one returns to their home culture in order to readjust to those cultural expectations. The adaptation back into one's home culture tends to vary in time and

difficulty according to individual time spent abroad and the level of integration and adaptation that was made by the visitor/stranger to the host culture.

Theoretical Framework

Becoming Interculturally Competent – DMIS

The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) was generated by Dr. Milton Bennett after years of observing how some people advanced in communicating cross culturally while others made no progress. The model suggested that improvement in intercultural communications would lead to a higher quality of experience (Bennett, 2004). He called this the move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. He defines the two as such:

> "I used the term "ethnocentrism" to refer to the experience of one's own culture as "central to reality." By this I mean that the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned; they are experienced as "just the way things are." I coined the term "ethnorelativism" to mean the opposite of ethnocentrism the experience of one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities." (Bennett, 2004: P. 62).

When one is socialized within a single culture from birth they are unlikely to question the views or practices of this culture. This reliance on one viewpoint is expressed by the term ethnocentrism. In contrast, ethnorelativsm refers to a person having information from

more than one culture available to choose from. When making meaning of a situation they are likely to view each cultural perspective as equally suitable.

Figure 1 adapted from Bennett (1993)

The first stage, denial is not restricted to the dominate culture. At all levels people tend to use overly simple and fallacious categories often based in racial or ethnic stereotyping. One manifestation of denial worldview is the inability or indifference in making a distinction between national culture: i.e. most Americans cannot differentiate between Chinese and Japanese cultures or between Latin cultures etc. (Bennett, 2004). The major problem with denial is the unwillingness to acknowledge cultural differences domestically as well as globally. If denial can be resolved due to exposure or education via teachers, friends etc. the major category of "other" is broken into smaller categories.

People in the second stage, defense against cultural difference, hold the mindset that the culture to which they identify is seen as the only significant one. People in this stage are more openly threatened by cultural differences than those in the denial stage because of the ability to recognize that there are differences in cultures (Bennett, 2004). This leads to an "us against them" mentality where one's own culture is seen as superior to all others. Defense is likely experienced by the dominate culture through negative stereotypical views, jokes or blaming. This can also result in stereotyping one's own culture in a positive way and the 'other' in a negative way (Bennett, 2004). This can be demonstrated by travelers who complain about the host culture not being "like us". Internationally this is the most common state demonstrated by the "with us or against us" slogan used by many world leaders (Bennett, 2004).

A variation of defense is Reversal, where an adopted culture is seen as superior to one's primary socialization (Bennett, 2004).   This can masquerade as cultural sensitivity

with the positive experience of the adopted culture being highlighted with seemingly

analytical critiques of one's primary culture. The problem here is that the experience of the

other culture is usually at a superficial level and the criticism of the primary culture is

usually due to the internalization of the negative stereotypes of others. Domestic

multicultural relationships exemplify this when the person from the dominant culture

takes on the cause of the non-dominant culture. In these cases, the polarization has not

changed but just switched sides. (Bennett, 2004). Resolution of defense comes from the

recognition of a common humanity between all peoples. This lays the ground for

minimization.

In the stage of minimization, the polarized view of cultural differences has been

dropped. There is now the thought that if everyone could be "like us" they would (Bennett,

2004). There is a tendency to overestimate one's ethnic or racial appreciation. While

comparatively tolerant, people at this stage cannot appreciate other cultures because they

cannot clearly see their own with clarity (Bennett, 2004). For non-dominant cultures

minimization involves accepting ideas such as the "melting pot." Minimization is a

transition state between the higher levels of ethnocentrism and the entry levels of

ethnorelativism. In order to move out of minimization there needs to be an awareness and

recognition of one's own culture. Awareness is the ability to recognize that all of your

beliefs, behaviors and values are given by socialization in your primary culture.

Recognizing this will lead to the ability to imagine other viable options (Bennett, 2004).

Acceptance of cultural differences is the stage in which one recognizes that the way

they experience their own culture as just one of many worldviews that can be taken

(Bennett, 2004). Knowledge of a culture is less useful if the acceptance/adaptation worldview is not taken. Otherwise, the linguistic or behavioral skills from another culture are not applied appropriately leading to a fluent fool (a term coined by Bennett) Acceptance does not mean an uncritical agreement with everything about that culture or liking it. It means that one can acknowledge that it is another valid outlook and way of life different from other options but equally human (Bennett, 2004).

The stage of adaptation to cultural differences facilitates appropriate behavior and response to a culture and perceptions within that cultural context (Bennett, 2004). One worldview is evolved and enlarged to include other worldviews. Adaptation is not the same as assimilation, in which one leaves all existing cultural practice or ideas behind to take on another, because one is not giving up their own culture views but rather incorporating other views in order to expand. In domestic adaptation there is a mutual effort made by the dominate and non-dominate group to adjust their behavior to one another (Bennett, 2004). An issue to be confronted in the stage of adaptation is authenticity which requires a wider self-definition encompassing pieces of different cultures that you have become adapted to (Bennett, 2004). Often times adaptation is mistaken for cultural appropriation which is the flagrant characterization or use of elements of one's culture by members of a different culture. Examples include Halloween costumes, dreadlocks, use of culturally specific slang terms, etc. The difference here is that adaptation requires a genuine regard for the various cultures leading to appreciation for and desire to participate (Bennett, 2004) whereas appropriation does not.

Integration of cultural differences is the last stage in Bennett's model. Integration is the ability to expand one's experience of self to incorporate movement in and out of different worldviews with one's cultural self-identity taken from a mesh of two or more cultures and is central to none. Bennett argues that monocultural socialization leads to an inability to recognize other worldviews (2004). The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity infers that contact with cultural differences creates the drive for change in one's own worldviews.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

The transformative learning theory was originally proposed in 1969 by Jack Mezirow as an operational model for adult education. At this time there was a lack of a theory on which to base education training, research, or program development. Mezirow proposed a research based qualitative theory suggesting a foundation and approach for the systematic development of an adjusted structure of developed generalizations to predict behavior in adult learning situations. While social science and educational research focused on and attributed human behavior to attitudes, cultural norms, perception and cognition, social roles, status and group affiliation they did not recognize the individual's part in providing meaning to a situation. Transformative learning challenged the frequently accepted idea that a meaning is somehow intrinsic to a thing without an individual interpreting what is going on in a given situation in order to construct a meaning. The process of assigning a meaning to an object, be it animate or inanimate, involves interaction with the environment and people around an individual at that time. There also must be an internal communication to identify what meaning the object has for the individual. The

product of these internal and external interactions is a meaning that is used and modified

as a means to determine future behavior. Mezirow states that a functional theory "must

recognize that in doing so (assigning meaning) people are not merely acting out attitudes,

emotions, conscious motivations, ideas, drives, norms, values, status prescriptions, or

psychological mechanisms but rather are actively directing, checking, bending, and

transforming their lines of action in the light of what they encounter in the actions of

others." (Mezirow 1969: P. 9)

The theory originally proposed was later revisited and expanded on by Mezirow and

numerous others across the social sciences and humanities. In a later article Mezirow

states, "To make meaning is to make sense of an experience" (Mezirow, 1990: P. 1).

Learning is the course of developing a new or amended interpretation of the meaning of an

experience which will serve to guide subsequent understanding and action. There are

different elements of making meanings. We will focus on meaning perspectives which are

made up of higher meaning schemata than simply habitual and inherent rules used for

interpretation. Perspectives give a basis for interpretation involving symbol systems and

prototypes by which we assess objects or events in new experiences. Meaning perspectives

speak to the formation of expectations by which new experience is incorporated and

transformed by an individual's past experience in the course of interpretation. Meaning

perspectives are also the way in which an individual interprets an experience according to

moral and ethical values according to one's culture. Generally, these perspectives are

learned in childhood through socialization and reinforced and refined by the experiences

that confirm our expectations of the way things are supposed to be. Our meaning

structures become a critical evaluation tool for navigating the world around us.

As we gain new experiences we learn to reinterpret or expand on our existing meaning perspectives. The process of reflection plays in important role in the adult learning process as we are constantly referring to our existing schemas and reflecting on new experiences to determine the validity of our long established perspectives within the current context. Our efforts to maintain understanding in an ever changing world results in our continual need to problem solve and reflect on the effectiveness of the problem solving strategies employed. Experience fortifies, expands and enhances our structures of meaning by supporting the anticipated outcome of said experience (Mezirow, 1990). When the expected outcome is not met according to our structures of meaning there is cause for perspective transformation.

Learning differs in content and style as well as the tools that are applied to achieve the desired outcome. Communicative learning involves the understanding and interpretation of what others are communicating in regards to abstract concepts. This requires reflection and critique of the relevant social norms and cultural codes that designate influence and power over what interpretations are acceptable within a given culture. Communicative learning is largely interpretation and attempt to understand what is being communicated to them via verbal or nonverbal communication. In order to interpret the unknown and unfamiliar one must find themes and metaphors to create a meaning perspective. Our long lasting schemas and perspectives are already in place when confronted with the unfamiliar. As we assemble information about the unknown through experience new knowledge replaces the old assumptions and our meaning perspectives are altered. Critical reflection is a constant in the process of creating new perspectives as we are constantly referring back to our base of knowledge assessing what we know for a fit to

the new experience and challenging the validity of prior presuppositions. Questioning

presuppositions that have been in place and held near to our formation of belief systems

and values that have shaped our lives leads to cognitive, affective and conative elements of

transformation. Mezirow suggests (1990) the most impactful adult learning experiences

are prompted by critical self-reflection involving the reassessment of one's own orientation

to perception, knowledge, belief and action. The catalyst to perceptive transformation is an

external disorienting dilemma. This dilemma may be brought on by anything that

challenges standing presuppositions such as trying to understand a different culture where

known social norms are challenged.

Transformative learning highlights the importance of meaning construction, critical

reflection of one's self and established perceptions. Communicative learning holds a central

role in validating meaning through dialogue and consensus. Transformative learning

encompasses reflection specific to the reexamination of one's presuppositions on which

beliefs and behavior are based and the movement toward action based on insight derived

from the reestablished meaning perspectives.

A disorienting dilemma, as termed by Mezirow, or life changing event often forces

one to critically assess their presuppositions recognizing the limitations and reconstructing

accordingly. The theory breaks down the learning into schemas and perspectives in order

to understand the process. (Hodge, 2014). Adult learning is distinctive in the way that

metacognition allows for an awareness of limited meaning perspectives when there is

failure to cope with the current reality or situation leading to disorientation during

challenging experiences. There is a nuanced relationship between the adult learner and the

surrounding social situation. The recognition of limitation and move toward change of meaning perspectives can lead to feelings of separation from the familiar community of practice leading to a renewed view of one's self and the world surrounding them. This renewed view facilitates movement from one social practice to another (Hodge, 2014).

It is critical to understand the process of transformative learning as it involves the fundamental change of one's belief system leading to changes in interaction with the world (Arnd-Michael Nohl, 2015). The transformative learning theory was intended originally for formal adult education and has since been expanded to include informal learning across a range of topical terrains, age, race, gender and educational backgrounds in order to increase the understanding of the process of transformative learning. As cross discipline expansion of the theory has increased, there has been concern that the theory has deviated from its original meaning and intent. Dr. Chad Hoggan addresses this issue and proposes criteria for which an experience can be considered transformative learning (2016). Transformational learning was specifically set in place to address learning involved in extensive social change. It is suggested that the conditions behind a transformational learning experience are changes in worldview, epistemology, ontology and lastly behavior.

Intercultural Competency: A Transformative Learning Process

There is a limited scope regarding the approach to research in relation to intercultural competency (Taylor, 1994). The focus tends to be towards characteristics that may lead to a positive outcome in intercultural competency which has led to a lack of

research regarding how study participants learn to become interculturally competent (Taylor, 1994). Understanding how we learn is a key element to creating educational programs that may aid one's intercultural experience. Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning may aid in explanation of the learning process (Taylor, 1994).

As one enters an intercultural experience there will be stress and anxiety involved in the shock of adjusting to a new host culture. (Taylor, 1994). During the attempt to understand and adjust to the new culture one will encounter a state of transformation that is necessary in order to perform basic needs within his or her new cultural setting. The transformation of one's self during this time will lead to a revised outlook on the world around them (Taylor, 1994).

Previous literature has helped place focus on the stranger's transformation in the process towards intercultural competence suggesting that the stranger develops an ability to adjust his or her perspective of the host culture (Taylor, 1994). This adjustment of perspective will allow for one to become accustomed to the requests of the host culture. When one is met with an unfamiliar situation there is a need for reflection and possible change in the way that they view the world around them.

The transformative learning theory makes an effort to explain how an individual's meaning perspectives within the frame of cultural assumptions will influence the meaning one takes from his or her experiences (Taylor, 1994). When an experience does not fit into the existing parameters they are forced to modify their meaning perspectives to include the new experience (Taylor, 1994).

Taylor uses Mezirow's perspective transformation to relate to the process of

intercultural competency by identifying a link between three shared dimensions: the

catalyst for change, the process, and the outcome. Culture shock is linked to a catalyst for

change in an intercultural situation. Transformation is brought about by the shock and

need to change in order to grow and adapt to the new culture (Taylor, 1994). The process

element is the progression of perspective as well as intercultural transformation. In the

beginning of an intercultural experience there is a feeling of alienation. As a result of this

alienation one will begin to use trial and error to test new perspectives and habits (Taylor,

1994). The dimension of outcome is represented by a changed worldview that

encompasses increased inclusion and openness.

A learning model consisting of six components of the long term process of becoming

interculturally competent has been developed through a study of participant

transformation in intercultural settings (Taylor, 1994). Each of the components of this

model is intended to provide insight into the process of acquiring intercultural

competency.

The first of these components is "setting the stage" which acknowledges that each

individual has prior events in his or her life that have primed them to a unique level of

preparedness to learn in an intercultural setting. These events may include any prior

intercultural experiences, personal or educational goals.

The second component is identified as cultural disequilibrium which is thought to

be the catalyst for change (Taylor, 1994). In this stage an individual has a strong sense of

incompatibility within the new surroundings of the host culture. There is a struggle to

regain an emotional balance which is the driving force for transformation (Taylor, 1994).

The emotions that arise due to the cultural incongruence can leave a person feeling lonely,

scared, embarrassed and frustrated due to inability to navigate daily tasks with ease. This

is widely referred to as culture shock. Driven by the intense emotional response to the

failure to operate within an appropriate cultural manner one is motivated to employ

various behavioral approaches to meet the task at hand. Levels of cultural disequilibrium

vary depending on factors such as age, marital status, gender and competency in the host

language.

A key component acknowledged by Taylor during the transformation process is

critical reflection of the individual's prior perspectives and behaviors. Deep analytical

consideration of learned social behaviors and strategies and the active attempt to adjust

toward locally appropriate perspectives and behaviors. In the attempt to rectify the

imbalance one is likely to begin by observing the host culture through watching others,

reading local publications and listening to the radio (Taylor, 1994). Active participation

often follows observation. This strategy can vary in depth but will often include shopping at

local venues, eating local food, wearing local dress, working and socializing with host

members. A subsequent strategy to active participation is the formation of significant

relationships with members of the host culture. Having meaningful relationships with

members of the host culture will allow the sojourner deeper access to knowledge common

to a native of the culture.

The last component identified by Taylor is an evolving intercultural identity. This

stage is characterized by the ongoing changes in an individual's perceptions, behaviors and

cultural identity. It is no longer appropriate to identify one's cultural outlook with one

particular culture but as a mixture of previously existing and newly learned perspectives.

This transformation can be demonstrated by the increased inclusion of varying points of

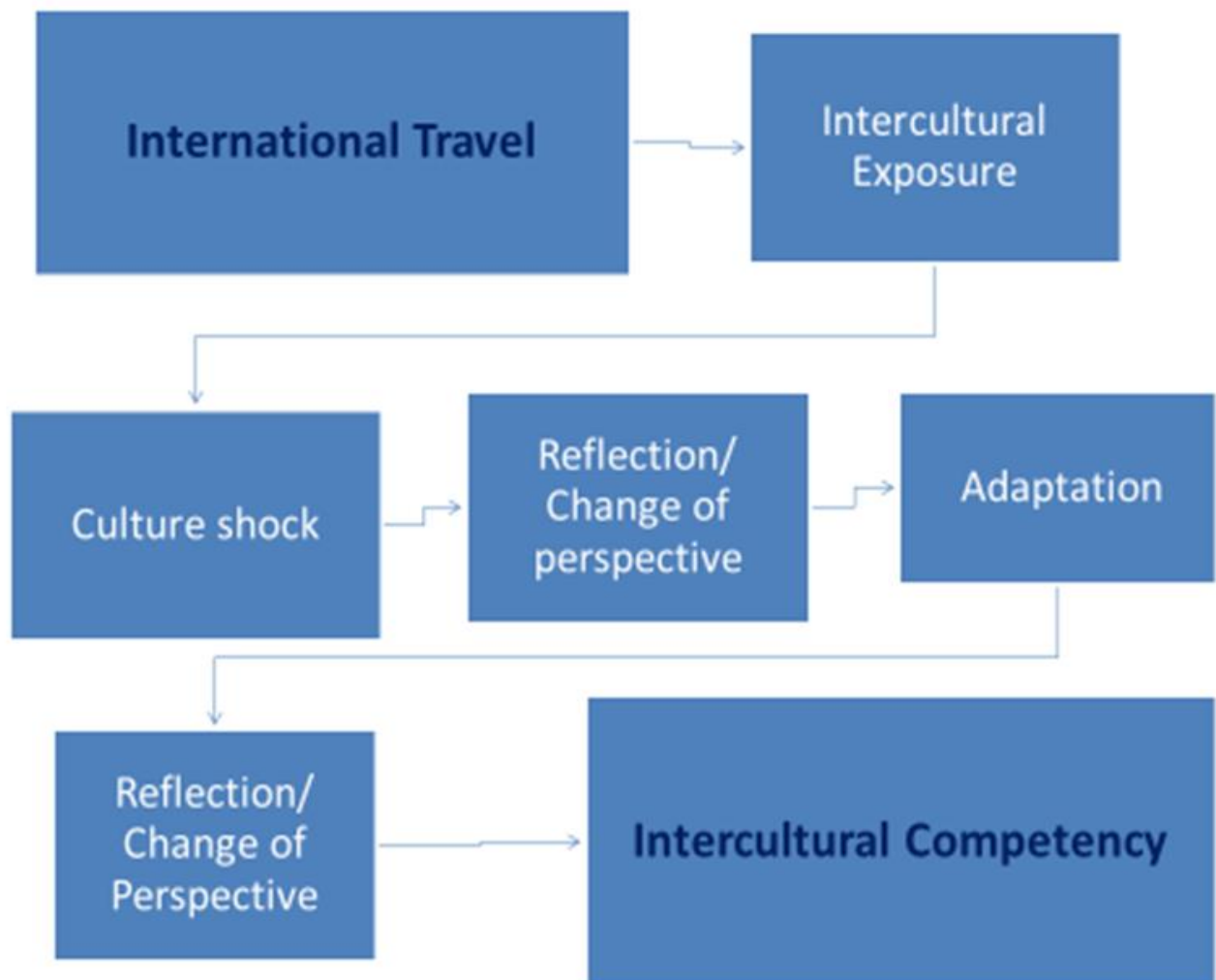view and greater recognition of human commonality (Taylor, 1994).

Figure 2

Conclusion

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through international corporations, study abroad programs, international travel and advanced communication technology there is a need for people of different cultures to be able to interact with one another. Unfortunately, the ability to get along with people of different backgrounds and cultures is something that a vast majority struggle with. Often times successful interactions with people of different cultures than one's own requires some understanding of language, history or cultural practices.

The focus of this paper is to propose international travel as an important piece in the puzzle to achieving intercultural competency. International travel will place the sojourner in an unfamiliar location and culture. Travel outside of your home location will expose you to things outside of your comfort promoting growth. Although I am focusing on international travel there is opportunity to encounter perspective changing experiences anywhere outside of what is known and comfortable.

I am stressing international travel because our availability to travel within the United States, encountering cultures different than the majority culture is fairly common. In this intra-national experience, we have foundations of the majority culture available. We are not truly strangers in the situation. Although there is the availability to learn and expand perspectives there is the choice not to do so and ignore the availability of cultural diversity. When one is spending time abroad it is more difficult to ignore the cultural difference and many times the visitor/stranger to the situation does not have that option.

Regarding international travel, there are various manners in which one can travel abroad. With luxury, or resort style travel the contact and exposure to the host culture is minimal. One has the option to taste new foods and observe new traditions while the comforts of the home culture are readily available. When backpacking through several locations the time is usually limited or superficial in each which does not allow for authentic involvement in the host culture. When a sojourner is immersed in a host culture there is a higher involvement with the ins and outs of the daily activities. Working or attending school in an intercultural setting pushes one to adjust to their surroundings in order to fit in and reduce the chance of anxiety, stress or loneliness. The last example of immersion provides the opportunity to transform and grow into an interculturally competent state.

As we are confronted with the uncomfortable feelings that arise from initial contact with a new culture and the inability to perform essential daily tasks a need to transform emerges in order to successfully perform our daily tasks without stress and anxiety. Initially we are dependent on our existing cultural perspectives and habits. When we attempt to employ our known practices and routines and they are met with a negative or non-response we are stimulated to reflect on our practices as they stand. Why are they not working in the way that we are used to? Recognizing that our old behaviors are ineffective in the new culture we will look for new behaviors to fit our new surroundings.

Limitations

In the majority of studies, theories and proposed resolutions to cultural obstacles have been written by members of dominant culture. This leaves out the perspective of the

minority cultures that are involved or affected by intercultural interactions. Another

limitation to these studies is the tools used to collect data. Using observational techniques

is useful but lacks introspective consideration. Self-reports are entirely introspective which

lacks objective judgment. While intercultural competency has been an interest of research

across varying social science disciplines there tends to be a lack of integration of multiple

views. Across social science disciplines the focus varies but rarely includes both macro and

micro level components. Differing models and perspectives often argue past one another

and ignore the relations that exist between them (Kim, 2000). There is a focus in studies on

culture shock and the frustration, acculturative stress and negative experience of cross-

cultural exposure and lack of focus on satisfactory experiences and happiness. (Kim, 2000).

In order to understand how to successfully achieve intercultural competency there needs

to be research on all aspects of one's experience.

Future research

In regards to future research, longitudinal studies may provide a deeper

understanding of how background experiences factor in to intercultural integration.

Longitudinal studies would also provide more insight into the reintegration process once

the sojourner returns to their home culture. This may provide more insight in to the

retention, or lack of, regarding changes in perspectives. Future research may also include

generalizing evidence to include relations between international travel and intra-societal

relationships. It would also be useful to implement intercultural studies regarding both

eastern and western cultures from majority as well as minority perspectives.

      The theoretical nature of the studies discussed could give way to additional research in cognitive neuroscience. Currently there seems to be limited research considering the effect of intercultural interactions on cognitive functions. i.e. learning, language, perception and memory. One study regarding cognitive functioning of monocultural versus multicultural or bicultural persons suggests that bicultural/multicultural persons have a higher level of cognitive complexity than monocultural persons. Evidence supports the idea that bicultural/multicultural persons have linguistic and developmental advantages over monocultural persons (Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006). Benet et al. support the necessity for further understanding of the cognitive and behavioral implications and greater complexities regarding information processing and information management amongst bicultural and multicultural persons.

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