

Theory Reflections: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Millions of people change homes each year crossing cultural boundaries—from immigrants and refugees resettling in search of a new life, to temporary sojourners finding employment overseas, governmental agency employees, Peace Corps volunteers, military personnel, and exchange students, to name only a few. Although unique in individual circumstances, all strangers in an unfamiliar environment embark on the common project of cross-cultural adaptation; that is, establishing and maintaining a relatively stable and reciprocal relationship with the host environment. Even relatively short-term sojourners must be at least minimally concerned with building a healthy functional fitness in ways similar to the native population.

Such commonly shared adaptation experiences are the focus of this cross-cultural adaptation theory. In this theory, cross-cultural adaptation is conceived as a process of dynamic unfolding of the natural human tendency to struggle for an internal equilibrium in the face of often adversarial environmental conditions. Multiple forces are simultaneously at work surrounding the communicative interface between the individual and the host environment, from the conditions of the environment and the ethnic and personal predispositions of the individual. Some of the factors may be more pertinent than others in specific cases of cross-cultural adaptation. In some cases, adaptive successes may be almost entirely due to the openness, strength, and positivity of the stranger's personality, which enable the stranger to overcome even the most severely unreceptive host environment. In other cases, very little adaptive change may take place in strangers whose ethnic community offers an almost complete insulation from having to face the host cultural challenges.

Central to this adaptation process is host communication competence, the ability to communicate in accordance with the norms and practices of the host culture and actively engage in its social communication processes. This means that, should we choose to adapt successfully, we would need to concentrate on acquiring new cultural communication practices and be willing to put aside some of the old ones. To become competent in the host communication system, in turn, requires active participation in the interpersonal and mass communication processes of the local community. Just as we cannot learn to swim without actually plunging into the water, we cannot truly learn to communicate without actually communicating.

The theory further argues that, as we keep our sight on the goal of successful adaptation in the host society, we experience a gradual personal identity transformation—a subtle and largely unconscious change that leads to an increasingly intercultural personhood. Of significance in this process is the development of a perceptual and emotional maturity and a deepened understanding of human conditions. Despite, and because of, the many unpredictable vicissitudes of the new life, we are challenged to step into a domain that reaches beyond the original cultural perimeters. Although our old identity can never be completely replaced by a new one, it can be transformed into something that will always contain some of the old and the new side by side, to form a new perspective that allows more openness and acceptance of differences in people, a capacity to participate in the depth of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experience of others.

In the end, the viability of a theory rests on the reality to which it is directed. To the present theory, the reality is the unfolding of experiences and accompanying changes in countless individuals who, at this very moment and at all corners of the world, are striving to forge a new life away from their familiar grounds. There is no denying that cross-cultural adaptation occurs, and this theory simply affirms this reality. The real choice left for us, then, is the degree of

change that we are willing to undergo and embrace. By refusing to change, we can minimize the change. By accelerating our adaptive efforts, we can maximize it. The theory further emphasizes the important role that our own individual and cultural backgrounds as well as the conditions of the new environment play in facilitating or impeding the adaptation process. Yet, ultimately, it is each of us who is the primary “mover,” as well as the primary bearer of the “burden,” of our own adaptive change.

The tightly knit system of communication and transportation continues to bring differing cultures, nationalities, races, religions, and linguistic communities closer than ever before in a web of interdependence and a common fate. We no longer have to leave home to experience new cultural learning and cross-cultural adaptation. For many people in the world, physical distance no longer dictates the extent of exposure to the images and sounds of once distant cultures. Many urban centers present their own contexts of cross-cultural adaptation, the natives are routinely coming into face-to-face contacts with non-natives. The business-as-usual ways of doing things are fast losing their relevance, as culture in its “pure” form has become more a nostalgic concept than a reality. They are challenged to face one another's various differences and search for human similarities so as to be able to move beyond their customary imagination in search of creative solutions to problems. Such routine encounters compel everyone involved to put aside and even unlearn at least some of the original cultural patterns.

Of course, the rapidly changing reality confronting us in the globalizing world can be threatening to many people, provoking a keen sense of unsettling discontinuity, malaise, and nostalgia for the age of certainty, permanence, and a fixed and unitary cultural identity. Yet the dynamic nature of cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural identity development points to an alternative way of living in the world. It shows us that we can strive to embrace and incorporate seemingly divergent cultural elements into something new and unique—one that conjoins and integrates, rather than separates and divides. It projects the real possibility of cultivating a special kind of mindset in which cross-borrowing of identities is not an act of “surrendering” one’s personal and cultural integrity, but an act of respect for cultural differences that leaves neither the lender nor the borrower deprived.

In the end, cross-cultural adaptation is a journey that compels us to make choices and to be accountable for the outcomes. Those who have successfully crossed cultural boundaries are likely to be those who choose to adapt and to be changed by that choice. Although their tribulations can be staggering, they have worked through the setbacks and come out victorious with an increased capacity to see others, themselves, and situations in a new light. Their personal achievements are a tribute to the ever-present human capacity to adapt—the capacity to face challenges, learn from them, and evolve into a greater self-integration that defies the simplistic and conventional categorizations of people. Theirs is a way of being in the world that nurtures the primacy of individual freedom in meeting one of the singular challenges of our time—the necessity of reaching out in new ways of anchoring ourselves creatively and constructively in the rapidly changing world.

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