

Theory Reflections: Intensity Factors in Intercultural Experiences

The Theory

This theory section examines intensity factors, which I define as those situational variables and personal attributes that can influence the psychological intensity or stress associated with intercultural experiences (Paige, 1993, 2). These are derived from theory, research, and a wealth of anecdotal evidence gathered over the past 50 years on the causes and consequences of adjustment and adaptation to new cultures and culturally diverse environments. They apply in different ways and degrees to virtually all sojourners be they voluntary, such as students, and professional persons in countries other than their own, or involuntary, such as persons displaced from their home countries by war, political strife, and economic crises.

The value of knowing about intensity factors is considerable. An intensity analysis, for example, can help international educators design predeparture, on-site, and reentry programs that attend to these issues. Moreover, given that the study abroad literature is showing the importance of facilitating intercultural learning and adaptation (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige 2009; Paige, Cohen, and Shively 2004), intensity factors also represent an important component of the intercultural teaching and learning tool kit. Sojourners themselves can use intensity factors to understand the challenges they are experiencing and develop more effective coping and learning strategies, as well as seek out support for responding to them. The *Maximizing Study Abroad* texts (Paige et al. 2006; Mikk et al. 2009) are designed to serve educators and sojourners, and introduce intensity factors early on to the reader.

Ultimately, intensity factors can be of considerable value in the design of intercultural programs, in guiding and advising persons involved in intercultural transitions, and in facilitating the intercultural development of the sojourners.

The Ten Intensity Factors

1. Cultural Differences

Cultural differences in values, beliefs, and behaviors represent the most common intensity factors. The stress of adaptation is greater as the cultural distance between home and host culture increases. Moreover, the more negatively the individual evaluates particular cultural differences, the more stressful the intercultural experience will be.

2. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is an intensity factor that expresses itself in two ways. First, ethnocentric persons, particularly those in denial and defense on Bennett's intercultural continuum (1993), find intercultural experiences more threatening. Second, some cultural communities themselves are less accepting of outsiders. Sojourners in these more ethnocentric cultures, regardless of their openness to the new culture, will find the experience to be more stressful.

3. Cultural Immersion

The more immersed the person is in another culture—interacting with host culture counterparts and/or using the host country language on a regular basis—the greater the amount of stress. Culture and language fatigue can be the result of extensive immersion. The stress of cultural immersion can be reduced by spending time with persons from the home culture. This allows for cultural reaffirmation and renewal.

4. Cultural Isolation

Cultural isolation is deep immersion combined with limited opportunities to interact with home culture/country peers. This can result, for example, from being isolated by geography or workplace conditions. The greater the isolation, the greater the stress.

5. Language

Persons unable to speak the language of the host culture will often find the experience more stressful. Further, the more essential language ability is to functioning in the target culture, the greater will be the stress if one's language skills are lacking. The ability to speak the target language is not always essential, nor does it assure effective communication or intercultural adjustment. Lack of language skills, however, can lead to social isolation and frustration.

6. Prior Intercultural Experience

Stress is affected by the amount and nature of one's prior intercultural experience. In general, people with a limited intercultural background will experience more stress in a cross-cultural situation. Those with a great deal of previous intercultural experience will generally adapt more effectively because they have already developed effective learning and coping strategies, have realistic expectations, and possess strong intercultural communication skills.

7. Expectations

There are two major expectation issues in intercultural work. First, persons who have positive but unrealistic expectations about the new culture will feel a psychological letdown after a time. Second, persons who have high expectations of themselves in terms of their ability to work effectively in the new culture will experience stress when they do not feel they are meeting their own standards of effective performance.

8. Visibility and Invisibility

Persons who are physically different from members of the host (or dominant) culture are highly visible and may become the object of curiosity, unwanted attention, or discrimination. This can lead to considerable stress. Stress can also occur when an important aspect of one's identity is invisible to members of the host culture (e.g., one's religion or political philosophy) or is concealed because it is not accepted in the host culture (e.g., sexual orientation). Concealing something about oneself for whatever reasons can cause considerable psychological stress.

9. Status

The markers of status vary considerably across cultures. Persons who feel they are not getting the respect they deserve or, conversely, feel they are receiving unearned recognition will find the experience more psychologically intense. Qualities that are valued in the home culture may not be important in the new one and can result in a loss of status. Alternatively, one might gain status on the basis of characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or family background that might not be important in the home culture.

10. Power and Control

One of the most consistent research findings is that persons in cultures other than their own feel a loss of power and control over events and people compared to what they are accustomed to at home. And the more power one is used to exercising, the more disturbing is the loss. Their personal efficacy is diminished and they can feel that things are "out of control." The less power and control the person has in the intercultural situation, the more psychologically stressful the experience will be.

– R. Michael Paige

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