

On a Personal Experience of Cultural Adaptation

---From the Perspective of Microculture

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Abstract

This paper, from the perspective of microculture, mainly explores how the cultural anthropological theory “cultural adaptation” works on a personal experience of a student who pursues her further study inter-regionally in the different provinces of China. Much more focus will be given on the main models the personal cultural adaptation has followed in the study. Different levels of personal cultural adaptation outcomes will also be discussed in the later part of this paper.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, Model, Experience

1. Introduction

Adaptation, originally as a biological concept, is an alteration or adjustment in structure or habits, by which a species or individual improves its condition in relationship to its environment. Every creature on the earth, including human beings, has the essential and innate capacity of adapting to the outer environment. That is on the level of biological adaptation. The evolution of human beings makes them outmatch all the other creatures to develop their own language and culture, which is unique only among themselves. At this time, the adaptation of human beings could not only be confined in the scope of biological one. Cultural adaptation, at this point, is necessary and indispensable for the further development of human beings. The significance and importance can be represented especially when the cultural contexts or environments have changed no matter it is a change of international, intercultural, interethnic, inter-religion, or inter-region, etc.

The term “microculture”, the counterpart of “macroculture”, can refer to a social group that shares distinctive traits, values, and behaviors that set it apart from the parent macroculture of which it is a part (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). The identity of microculture can be based on traits and values of different ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, geographic region, place of residence conditions, and so on, among which, geographic region and place of residence will be what I give my focus on in this paper. The change of geographic region and place of residence will evoke the change in psychology and behavior to adjust and adapt oneself to the new environments.

2. Cultural Adaptation

2.1 Cultural Adaptation versus Biological Adaptation

Human beings, like other living creatures in the world, also have biological and psychological needs. Other animals fill their needs primarily through biological adaptation, for example, a lion uses speed and sharp teeth and claws to capture and eat its prey. However, our human beings develop forms of knowledge and technologies that enable them to get the necessary energy from the environment and make life more secure. This knowledge and technology forms a core of culture that can be passed from generation to generation and group and group, so human beings adapt to their world culturally (Nanda & Warms, 2002).

Cultural adaptation has some distinct advantages over biological adaptation. Because human adapt through learned behavior, they can change their approach to solving problems more quickly and easily. However, creatures whose adaptations are primarily biological change slowly (Nanda & Warms, 2002).

Adaptation, coming being into one of the basic characteristics of culture, makes people develop to accommodate environmental conditions and available natural and technological resources (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). Culture, in fact, is the way human beings adapt to the world (Nanda & Warms, 2002).

2.2 The Definition of Cultural Adaptation

From the aspect of sociology and anthropology, cultural adaptation is the long-term process of adjusting and finally feeling comfortable in a new environment (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988). Immigrants who enter a culture more or less voluntarily and who at some point decide to adapt to the new cultural context experience cultural adaptation in a positive way.

Cultural adaptation, especially intercultural adaptation is broadly used in the literature of intercultural communication studies, and according to Kim, it refers to the process of increasing the level of fitness of people to meet the demands of a new cultural environment. It deals with how sojourners or new immigrants experience the distress caused by mismatches or incompatibility between the host culture and the culture of birth (Fan, 2004).

2.3 Models of Cultural Adaptation

2.3.1 The Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Model

This model was put forward by communication theorist William Gudykunst. He stresses that the goal of effective intercultural communication can be reached by reducing anxiety and seeking information, the so-called uncertainty reduction (Gudykunst, 1995). The uncertainty can be classified into different types. Predictive uncertainty is the inability to predict what someone will say or do. Explanatory uncertainty is the inability to explain why people behave as they do (Martin & Nakayama, 2000).

In fact, some level of anxiety is optimal during an interaction. Too little anxiety may convey that we don't care about the person. Too much anxiety causes us to focus only on the anxiety and not on the interaction. This model assumes that to communicate effectively we will gather information to help us reduce uncertainty and anxiety. The theory predicts that the most effective communicators are people who have a solid self-concept and self-esteem, have flexible attitudes (a tolerance for ambiguity, empathy) and behaviors and are complex and flexible in their categorization of others (Martin & Nakayama, 2000).

2.3.2 The U-Curve Model

This model, applied to many different migrant groups, is based on research conducted by a Norwegian sociologist, Sverre Lysgaard, who interviewed Norwegian students studying in the United States. The main idea is that migrants go through fairly predictable phases in adapting to a new cultural situation.

The first phase is the anticipation or excitement phase. The second phase, culture shock, happens to almost everyone in intercultural transitions. During this phase, migrants experience disorientation and often a crisis of identity. Because identities are shaped and maintained by one's own cultural context, experiences in new cultural contexts often raise questions about identities. The third phase is adaptation. In this phase, how much of the migrants should be changed and to what degree should he or she to adapt is what should be pay attention to (Martin & Nakayama, 2000).

2.3.3 The Transition Model

Culture shock and adaptation have been viewed as a normal part of human experience, as a subcategory of transition shock. Janet Bennett (1998), a communication scholar, says that culture shock and adaptation are just like any other transition, such as going away to college, getting married, or moving from one part of the country to another. Psychologists have found that in this model most individuals prefer either a "flight" or "fight" approach to unfamiliar situations. The first preference, the "flight" approach, is to hang back, get the lay of the land, and see how things work before taking the plunge and joining in. The second preference, the "fight" approach, is to get in there and participate. Migrants who take this approach use the trial-and-error method. Individual preference is a result of family, social, and cultural influences. An alternative to fight or flight is the flex approach, in which the migrant uses a combination of productive fight or flight behaviors (Martin & Nakayama, 2000).

3. Microculture or Subculture

Microculture, as a counterpart of macroculture, refers to these groups which exist within the context of a larger society and share political and social institutions as well as some of the traits and values of the microculture. It can also be called subsocieties or subcultures. These cultural groups are called microcultures to indicate that they have distinctive cultural patterns while sharing some cultural patterns with all members of the macroculture and their unique patterns will identify themselves as members of their particular group. Cultural identity is based on several traits and values learned as a part of the national or ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, geographic region, place of residence conditions and so on (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998).

Our country, China, has a large size of land, so the people coming from different geographic regions can be traced back to different ethnic and religion groups. With the development of history and society, people of different origins have integrated into one whole integrity. However, the customs and habits of different regions have kept down, just by this, we can identify our particularity of being South-Chinese, North-Chinese, West-Chinese, etc. and our commonness of having the same nationality of Chinese.

4. A Personal Experience of Cultural Adaptation

A personal experience of cultural adaptation will be given as an exemplification to illustrate how cultural adaptation across different regions in China has happened and what kind of models or mixture of several models it has followed.

I, now as a postgraduate student studying in one of the most famous traveling cities in Northeast of China, Dalian, once spent all my young lives in my hometown, Shandong Province before I came here to continue my further study. For the first time leaving my friends and relatives in the lovely hometown and coming to a new environment, although it is only six hours' journey on the sea, I really experience some adaptation, especial cultural adaptation in my sojourning here.

Fostered and educated in my own region, my habits, customs, and even behaviors are deeply influenced by our regional cultures. Although I had been informed more or less about the Northeasters' obvious personalities and characteristics by means of the folk arts such as the comic dialogues on TV and the comments and evaluation from my people, that image and impression would always be in the mind if I didn't come here by myself.

Some microculture identities about these two different geographic regions gained from my personal knowledge before I stepped out my hometown should first of all be presented here. It is hoped that by the comparison of these two different regional identities and the comparison of what I heard of about Northeasters and what I experienced about Northeasters, the inter-regional cultural adaptation can be explicitly understood.

4.1 Two Microcultural Identities

Northeast culture plays a crucial role in the modern Chinese culture. Just for its folk arts are popular, welcomed and prospered on the mass media, we gain some generalized and simplistic identities from them. First of all, the most northeasters are regarded as talkative, eloquent, persuasive and humorous, which can be traced to their personality of extroversion and broad-mind. When these personalities developed to the exaggerated degree, Northeasters will become so extroverted as to be barbarian, so broad-minded as to be aggressive, so eloquent as to be dishonest, so talkative as to be boastful.

Shandong, as the original place of Confucianism, also has its own unique cultural identities. Most Shandong people are regarded as more loyal and honest than others in China. They are all very warm-hearted and helpful. They even would like to sacrifice their own benefits to help others. Under the influence of Confucianism, Shandong people will also give much focus on the concept of family and hometown. They will become especially intimate to the other people who sharing the same origin with them. Also for the reason of Confucianism, Shandong people are traditionally regarded more conservative than others. On the other hand, however, they will become less adventurous than others.

4.2 The Personal Experience of Cultural Adaptation

Just as the several models of cultural adaptation mentioned earlier are too generalized and simplistic for an individual's adaptation process, I will put my own cultural adaptation experience in every model to find how they worked.

4.2.1 Following the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Model

Anxiety and uncertainty, been given much stress in this model, is also what I really experienced in the first months after I came Dalian. This is especially felt when I got in touch with the local people when I went shopping in the fairs and the private-owned shops. I was puzzled, anxious and even hurt when my bargaining suggestions could not satisfy their request. Sometimes even long after I was be cheated I could realized the fact. The anxiety and worry that the local people looked down upon the outcomers and even deceived us make me be afraid of going outside to maintain the daily life activities. At some times I even felt that the teachers and classmates in the campus were not mine, my own teachers and classmate were only in my hometown's classroom. They were all others' teachers and classmates, so I would fear that the teacher would favor the local students and the classmates would only want to make friends with the ones whose hometowns were same or similar.

Afterwards, I gradually corrected my attitudes and I realized that I should communicate with the local and

indigenous people effectively. First of all, I improved my self-esteem and told myself that I was not inferior to the Dalianese. I tried my best to speak standard mandarin. As the time going on, I found that the individuals were different from the stereotypes. Some people would be kind to me if I also took a warm-hearted attitude towards them. That is to say, empathy theory was applied but I didn't really realize what it was at that time. By this time, I have made a lot of indigenous friends and can communicate with them freely. Anxiety and uncertainty have been reduced to the minimal degree.

4.2.2 Following the U-Curve Model

The clear-cut phase division is special in this model. My personal adaptation process also suited the three phases or stages.

The first phase of anticipation or excitement happened to me in the first few weeks after I arrived here. Dalian, as one of the most attractive traveling cities in China, will always have comfortable climate, warm sunshine, and clean air in my imagination, so I can be motivated by this natural environment to make some successful improvement in my personal further study life. That was what I was excited at and expected for when I firstly enjoyed the environment here. Everything that was different from my knowledgeable definition was new and attractive for me at that time. I would like to rush to every spots and places of interest to experience the particularity of this city then.

The anxiety and disorientation I mentioned in the last model in fact could be showed in the second phase in this model. Confusion, disappointment, and hopelessness were what I often felt and I even regretted to choose this place to continue my further study. I also once doubted about my identity and personality. I was once a quiet and introverted excellent student in the eye view of my local teachers. After getting touch with many talented and extroverted local students here, I realized that they would grasp every opportunity to show their excellence, the quiet I would be dropped behind. Therefore I would doubt if I really lacked in some capacity or ability to study my major as well as them. The isolation complex of me from other local students was explained by the fact that they had been acquainted with the environment for a long time but I was completely new in the environment. In the beginning of my study here I was not in the equal situation with them in nature. Therefore, this phase was the most awful time for me. I was even taken the strategy of self-confining, refusing to communicate with the outside world during this period.

The third stage, adaptation, is the fitness of the new environment. As far as I am concerned, I only dear to say I am getting closer and closer to this goal. The complete adaptation in this place can never be achieved on myself only during the three or four years' study here. I am glad to see my free daily communication with the local Dalianese speaking the dialects and my loving for both this university and this city is becoming more and more affectionate.

4.2.3 Following the Transition Model

I admitted that I represented the Shandong people's traditional microcultural identity of conservative to some extent. In addition, my characters can also be included into the introverted type. Therefore, in most situations of my personal cultural adaptation to this northeastern environment, I took the flight approach to deal with all the new things around me. I would, first of all, observe how things are getting on and how the other people deal with them, and then I would process the objective observation and my subjective judgments before I took the final measures. I would like to be slow and steady rather than to be imprudent and careless. However, this flight approach once made me trapped into a pessimistic life attitude. At that time, I am afraid to make any adventure in the living and study. The adaptation result is that I now can be in preference of the flex approach. In some situation I can boldly try and adventure, but in some other situations I will still be care about my behaviors.

4.3 The Outcomes of Cultural Adaptation

The most satisfying result of my personal cultural adaptation is that I am now able to not excluding this place from my inner spiritual world and I have accepted its role as a new experiment and trial for me in my whole life. I gradually love this place and regard it as my second hometown. The indigenous people are becoming more and more lovely and kind to me in the process of their accepting me as one member of their community. My psychological and emotional world were not always puzzled and isolated. Not disappointment and disorientation, but more and more hope can be found now in my inner spiritual world.

Functional fitness, one of the predictable outcomes in cultural adaptation, can also be represented in my personal experience. After the adaptation in this city, I gradually find that I will not be scared or afraid when I don't know how to get to a strange place. Every problem can gain a solution as long as I make fully use of what I have learned. For example, in a city that has so many squares and plazas like Dalian, the newcomers will easily lost

their way and are puzzled about the geography. One of my adaptations to the geography of this city is that I can now easily tell which direction I should follow in order to find the nearest bus routines. Function effectively in daily life is never an ideal now. Sometimes I even found I can do some favor for the indigenous and local people. For the highest level of the adaptation result, to form an intercultural identity, I don't think I can achieve. That means the balance between your former identity and the new identity should be kept. When I reenter, or saying simply, go back to my hometown, I am not confident in the predictable fact that my friends and relatives will regard me as the one I was before I went to Dalian. Therefore, maintain a suitable identity in every cultural context will be what I pursue forever.

5. Conclusions

After applying the personal experience into the cultural adaptation theory, on the one hand, I seem to find the solutions and keys to my daily puzzles and the individual cultural values has been reformed, and on the other side, the essential and popular theory of cultural adaptation has been fully understood and researched. It is hoped that this paper can more or less contribute to the motivation of researching the cultural adaptation theory deeply. However, after all, my personal experience depends only on my own subjective level, if we want to make this research field further, more and more individuals' different kinds of adaptation exemplifications should be included into the study.

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