

In a cultural No Man's Land – or, how long does culture shock last?

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ABSTRACT:

This essay is an attempt to combine theories of sojourner adaptation with the qualitative results of my field work among Scottish immigrants in Copenhagen. I argue that theories of acculturation often presuppose a limited time-frame; that the usefulness of Lysgaard's acculturation model may be questioned; and that companies lose valuable intercultural competence by recalling sojourners before they have completed their process of integration. Learning from practice, I argue that sojourners will change as a result of their stationing overseas; that the intercultural skills obtained by employees during their sojourn represent a valuable resource for international business; and that companies have an obligation to assist sojourners upon their return to their home culture.

Keywords: sojourner adaptation, process of integration, international business, concepts of identity, learning from practice.

Introduction

As a teacher of intercultural communication, I am confronted with a need to translate theoretical concepts into real-life situations. I find that many theories work on the abstract level, but once we apply them to practice, they provide very few guidelines. This essay is partly inspired by my wish to combine theory with practice, and partly an attempt to show how research into intercultural business communication may benefit from qualitative methods developed in the neighbouring fields of anthropology and ethnology.

The general purpose of my analysis is to check the model of cultural adaptation proposed by Sverre Lysgaard in the 1955 article "Adjustment in a Foreign Society: Norwegian Fulbright Grantees Visiting The United States" against my own field work amongst Scottish immigrants in Copenhagen in the winter of 1996/97, as well as personal observations as a sojourner in Scotland between 1997 and 2000. Since 1955, Lysgaard's model has been adopted by a number of writers on intercultural communication, which is why I have found it relevant to subject this theory to further scrutiny. My argument is based on three assumptions:

1. Theories of cultural adaptation presuppose a limited time-frame (one year or two) and therefore fail to address the fundamental transformation that takes place during the integrative process. As a consequence, to use the terms established by Varner and Beamer, the process of acculturation rarely moves beyond the level of onstage culture – i. e. cultural traits that are "easily identifiable" – to an underlying change of backstage values – the reasons "why [people] believe, act, and look at things the way they do" (Varner and Beamer 2005: 3).
2. The usefulness of the acculturation model employed by theorists of intercultural communication may be questioned. As he relates, Lysgaard's U-curve model was based on interviews with more than 200 Norwegian Fulbright students in the United States (Lysgaard 1955: 45). The duration of the students' sojourn, Lysgaard writes, "lasted from less than three months to more than three years, the average stay being about a year." (1955. 45) With the exception of Ph.D. students, in other words, Lysgaard's informants stayed for a relatively short period of time, and most were aware of the length of their stay from the start. I believe this certainty makes a difference in terms of the way that individuals adapt to new cultural surroundings, and that Lysgaard's students are not representative of sojourners more generally.
3. Finally, I shall argue that valuable intercultural competence is lost because sojourners return to their home cultures at the point when they are becoming integrated into their host culture. After

one or two years' adaptation, during which they may not live up to previous standards because of their need to develop adequate linguistic and cultural skills, sojourners are recalled at the moment when they are able to employ this newly acquired intercultural competence to the benefit of their company. In other words, valuable human resources invested in the cultural adaptation process are lost.

I have divided my discussion into three parts: a theoretical discussion, which will address the issues of cultural identity, cultural adaptation and methodology; an analytical section, in which I present my personal model of sojourner adaptation; and finally, I offer my reflections on the lessons we may draw from practice.

An essentialist vs. a constructionist concept of identity

The discussion of cultural adaptation presupposes a definition of the concept of identity. In *Communicating Across Cultures*, Stella Ting-Toomey distinguishes between "primary identities that exert an important, ongoing impact throughout our lives", and "situational identities", which are "situational dependent, that is, changeable from one situation to the next." (Ting-Toomey 1999: 29) These definitions are interesting because they combine an essentialist emphasis on the stability of certain factors (i. e. the "cultural", "ethnic", "gender" and "personal" identities (Ting-Toomey 1999: 30-36)) with a constructionist focus on the situational nature of self-images. On her concept of "situational identities" Ting-Toomey writes:

[S]ituational identities refer to role, relationship, facework, and symbolic identities that are adaptive self-images and highly situational dependent. These identities are changeable – dependent on the configuration of the interaction goals, individual wants and needs, roles, statuses, and activities in the situation. Compared to the four primary identities (above), they are less stable and are driven by external situational features and are subsequently internalized by individuals operating in the society. (Ting-Toomey 1999: 36)

In relation to my topic, Ting-Toomey's notion of primary identities is problematic because it indicates that there are parts of our identity which rarely ever change, which is not what I have observed. The concept of "situational identities", on the other hand, is useful because it underlines a basic characteristic of all self-images. Namely, as Stuart Hall puts it in his introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity*, that "identities are never unified . . . never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." (Hall 1996: 4) Hence identity – who we are, why and how – reflects the specific situation we happen to be in right here and right now rather than the general culture we were born and socialised into, which is central to our understanding of cultural adaptation.

The Swedish ethnologist Owe Ronström imagines identity construction in terms of a physical movement between different identity "zones". In the essay "På jakt efter jugoslaverna" Ronström answers his initial question – when and how do you feel Yugoslav – by defining four zones: the *bedroom zone* where identity is mainly gender-based (man or woman); the *everyday zone* where identity is based on membership of your family or circle of friends; the *citizen zone* where individuals are characterised on the basis of their occupational, professional and social functions; and finally the *ethnic zone* – imagined by Ronström as a local, public space constituted by ethnic institutions and groups. (Ronström 1988: 161-63) This latter, ethnic zone is central to cultural adaptation and defined by Ronström in the following words: "Here [the Yugoslavs] establish specific social spaces, confined in time and place, with distinctive traits that characterise them and distinguish them from other social spaces occupied by these people" (Ronström 1988: 162). According to this theory, identification depends on the social zone we happen to find ourselves in. Human beings possess multiple identities, but their value is relative, relying on specific contexts and situations.

I find Ronström's thesis useful in relation to my argument because it underlines that cultural identities are situational. Our self-images are the result of continuous adjustment to specific circumstances, which suggests that we are capable of change. At the micro-level, we constantly shift between gender, family, professional, social and ethnic identities, but we are often unaware of such adaptations because they happen all the time. At the macro-level, i. e. when we move into cultures that are radically different in

terms of language, norms and values, our adjustment will take longer, but I still believe we are capable of adapting to such a degree that we may eventually come to act and think as cultural insiders in our new environment.

In "Adjustment in a foreign society", Lysgaard describes his model of cultural adaptation in the following words:

[We] observed that adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a 'crisis' in which one feels less well adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community. (Lysgaard 1955: 51)

Using Lysgaard as their theoretical basis, Iris Varner and Linda Beamer explain culture shock in terms of four stages: euphoria, disillusionment, adjustment and integration (Varner and Beamer 2005: 16-17). To these may be added a possible reverse culture shock, which I have chosen to ignore because it is of limited use in relation to the present argument. The first encounter with a new culture, euphoria or the holiday stage, is mostly exciting, but according to Beamer and Varner it normally lasts no longer than two weeks, and, they add; "some people skip it altogether." (Varner and Beamer 2005: 16) In contrast, the second stage of culture shock is characterised by a general downturn. Sojourners find their constant exposure to an alien culture frustrating and may seek consolation in the company of countrymen in similar circumstances. The feeling of culture shock develops from the realisation that one does not possess enough knowledge to manage in a new cultural setting. Its symptoms may be physical (illness and physical strain) as well as psychological (frustration, homesickness, depression) (Varner and Beamer 2005: 16), and, as Maureen Guirdham observes in *Communicating across Cultures*, it is an essential part of acculturation (Guirdham 1999: 287). Culture shock forces sojourners to open their minds and to confront members of the host culture in their search for inside information, which in the end will further their integration. The third stage of adjustment is characterised by Beamer and Varner as the ability to "cooperate more effectively with members of the host culture." (Varner and Beamer 2005: 16) Although they may not have achieved the level of linguistic and cultural fluency that we find at the fourth stage of integration, sojourners possess enough insight into the host culture to navigate safely. The last stage of integration is described by Beamer and Varner as "going native". At this stage, they reflect, businesses may worry "that the employee, who is now at home in another culture, does not totally represent them anymore." (Varner and Beamer 2005: 17) Maureen Guirdham refers to this stage as the "establishment of an 'intercultural identity'" and, as opposed to Varner and Beamer, perceives it to be a positive development (Guirdham 1999: 294).

My alternative model of cultural adaptation was originally developed on the basis of my field work, but I have since compared my results to personal experiences living abroad as well as later conversations with fellow-sojourners. My model contains three phases: arrival, the two-year crisis and the intercultural stage. When I started collecting my information, I never planned to impose a super-structure on my data, but as my interviewees kept returning to similar themes, I ended up with this model. I am aware of potential overlapping between my model and Lysgaard's and will address such issues in the course of my analysis.

Methodology:

According to the methodological categories established by Dr. C. Nakata and Yili Huang Pokay in their recent survey of global marketing literature, I will characterise my method as empirical qualitative (Nakata and Pokay 2004: 118). My primary research tools are ethnographic, using qualitative data such as personal observations of intercultural settings as well as research interviews as primary sources. Yet it is my intention to add a conceptual framework by comparing my reflections to relevant theories of intercultural communication.

The main argument against my method is the qualitative nature of my data. When I conducted the interviews, I decided against recording my conversations because I believed this would have made the interviews more formal. Instead I opted for an informal dialogue, in which I tried to record my interviewees' story-telling through continuous note-taking. There are several problems with this kind of method. First of all, everything said by my interviewees was filtered by me as note-taker. Deliberately or not, I may have missed out essential parts of the narratives, which might have resulted in a distorted

picture of the immigrants' experience. A second problem is structure. When examining the data offered by the interviewees, I may have attempted to impose a structure on my material, connecting interview fragments that are not necessarily compatible. My final problem is quotations. As I have no recordings, I am unable to quote my interviewees, which means that all references are implicit and indirect.

In terms of sampling, I think my choice of seven immigrants is fairly representative. My qualitative method limits the number of interviewees that can be included, and, as I approach my data as individual narratives rather than general accounts of national character, I do not consider the size of my group a problem. Within the group I have managed to obtain an acceptable distribution in terms of age (from 25 to 44 years old), gender (3 women, 4 men), professional occupation (workers, professionals, independents and public employees) and immigrant experience (from 2 years to 22). All live in the Copenhagen area, which was where I was based at the time.

My final considerations regarding methodology concern the interview process itself. Ideally we like to think of interviews in terms of a dialogue between the interviewer, who is open-minded about the experiences conveyed, and the interviewee, who narrates the stories as they occurred – not what he or she would have liked to happen, or what he or she thinks the interviewer would want to hear about a given situation. In practice, this rarely works. The interview process represents an identity construction in which I, as interviewer, provoke certain responses by asking specific questions about the nature of Scottish identity in Denmark. I found my respondents prepared for this discourse, and it is possible that they used the interviews as an opportunity to obtain information about my Danish perspective on their nationality. In other words, both parties may have used the interview to define national culture – whether Scottish or Danish – through the eyes of the Other.

Who are these people anyway?

When we discuss cultural adaptation, I think it is important to understand what type of people is involved. Stella Ting-Toomey distinguishes between sojourners and immigrants, and I think she is right to point out the differences between the two groups (Ting-Toomey 1999: 234-35). Such a distinction is problematic in terms of my own analysis. I draw on immigrant experiences and yet claim that such narratives are comparable to the sojourners' process of adaptation. I will justify my approach on two accounts. First of all, I see the main difference between sojourners and immigrants as a difference in terms of the intensity of the intercultural encounter rather than a difference in the nature of the experience itself. Because they expect their residence to be permanent, immigrants feel they have to try harder to adapt, and they will often find the process of acculturation more stressful. The degree of culture shock is closely related to the familiarity – or unfamiliarity – of the new environment, which means that movements between similar cultures will reduce the amount of stress considerably. In other words, immigration within the same cultural region – i. e. between Scotland and Denmark – will be less stressful than a temporary stationing in a very alien cultural environment, which supports my treatment of the Scots as sojourners. My second reason for drawing on the Scots' experiences is their own perspective on their situation. My seven interviewees have accepted that they are now living in Denmark for an indefinite period of time, but do not rule out the possibility of another move – either back to Scotland or to other parts of the world. They belong to the group of "Euro-Europeans" defined by the Danish anthropologists Anne Knudsen and Lizanne Wilken as "the employees of international companies, supranational organisations and news agencies, exchange students, sojourning business men and women, researchers working in the European research institutions – and anyone else, who happens to live and work in another European country" (Knudsen and Wilken 1996: 18). I regard Euro-Europeans as a special type of sojourner arising from the need for a mobile workforce within the European labour market. Yet I believe that Euro-Europeans are comparable to other sojourners in terms of cultural adaptation.

Most of my Scottish interviewees describe their arrival in Denmark as purely accidental. They had reached a point in life when they felt an urge to break with their immediate surroundings and start anew in another part of the world. The choice of country was coincidental. Some had already been offered jobs or studentships in Denmark, which determined their move, while others were invited by Danish friends or partners. All interviewees agree that they knew very little about the country before their arrival, and that they might as well have ended up somewhere else. They were in their early twenties when they left Scotland, and with the exception of one couple travelled on their own.

Stage 1: arrival in Denmark

On his arrival in a new country, 41-year-old George recalls the strange feeling he had when crossing the border without anyone asking him why he wanted to come here. He may have been different – un-Danish – but in everyday life this did not seem to matter to anyone. He found that he was received positively, which he ascribes to his status as a "peculiar alien" in Danish society – foreign and yet not foreign enough to threaten anyone. The arrival stage contains two dimensions: structural and cultural assimilation. Structural assimilation concerns the immigrants' physical conditions, including housing, employment situation, educational requirements, local authorities, etc., while cultural assimilation refers to social relationships, group memberships and new or existing networks.

In terms of structural assimilation, the experiences of immigrants and sojourners, in which category I place my Scots, differ considerably. Immigrants expect a permanent stay in their new culture, which increases their sense of uncertainty. They may have been forced to flee their home country, in which case they will not have a job or a secure basis to further their integration. This means they will have to rely on public welfare in order to establish themselves in their new place. Adding to such worries the social stigma attached to welfare in many parts of the world, it is hardly surprising if recent immigrants are overwhelmed by frustration rather than excitement. Sojourners, on the other hand, are likely to experience a sense of euphoria as their eyes open to new cultural surroundings. They will encounter local authorities in the form of their GP, tax officers and various municipal bodies, but as they normally have a job upon their arrival – or will find one very soon thereafter – they are perceived as a positive addition to the local workforce rather than a potential burden. Companies will help their employees find accommodation and schools, which means that sojourners are only confronted with few structural problems. Indeed any issue arising from structural factors may be an advantage, Maureen Guirdham observes, because it postpones an inevitable culture shock: "In the early days 'buffers' such as getting set up with work, accommodation and so on prevent real contact with the host culture." (Guirdham 1999: 288)

With regard to cultural assimilation, an early concern for many sojourners is the establishment of a social network. Some of my interviewees already had connections in the form of Danish partners, who helped them settle into their new place. Others would draw on work colleagues in order to obtain an insider perspective on their new culture. On the whole, they found their first encounter with Denmark fascinating, working their way slowly into a new country. This sensation could be compared to Lysgaard's initial stage, as described by Stella Ting-Toomey:

In the *honeymoon stage*, individuals are excited about their new cultural environment. They perceive people and events through pleasantly tinted (or "rose-colored") lenses. Nonetheless, they experience mild identity dislocation and disorientation; they also experience bursts of loneliness and homesickness. However, overall, they are cognitively curious about the new culture and emotionally charged up at meeting new people. (Ting-Toomey 1999: 248)

Ting-Toomey's understanding of the holiday stage as a lengthy process during which the sojourner may suffer several, minor culture shocks corresponds to the emotions conveyed by my interviewees as well as my recollections from the years in Scotland. I would thus describe my first year as representative of the holiday stage, with any early sense of frustration or alienation overshadowed by the excitement about a new home.

Stage 2: The two-year crisis

After the initial phase of discovery, in which they open their eyes to a new environment and possibly endure a series of minor downturns in their attempts to cope, sojourners move into the second stage of acculturation. I have named this the two-year crisis because of my observation that it often takes place during the second year of an intercultural encounter, and in relation to this, it is interesting that Lysgaard describes Norwegians whose stay in the United States lasted between six and eighteen months, as "less well adjusted" (Lysgaard 1955: 49). Iris Varner and Linda Beamer's terms "disillusionment and frustration" and Stella Ting-Toomey's "hostility stage" are equally useful, however, and they have the advantage of being devoid of a temporal dimension (Varner and Beamer 2005: 16; Ting-Toomey 1999: 248). It is thus important to recognise that the timing of this crisis depends on individual circumstances, which is not clear from my terminology.

The two-year crisis represents a psychological response to the change of identity that has taken place during the first part of the sojourn. Initial excitement gradually gives way to everyday reality, which leaves little time or energy for reflection. Professional obligations determine how you organise your daily life; you can now manage without the help of local colleagues, and at some point you stop wondering. From being all excitement and new adventures the host culture becomes a threat to your identity. My interviewees describe their two-year crisis in different ways. After a couple of years in Denmark, Sandra recalls, she wanted to distance herself from Danish culture. She seriously considered a return to Scotland, visited her homeland more frequently and settled for a group of English-speaking friends rather than Danish ones. Although she had been in Denmark for 22 years at the time of the interview, Sandra would still sense this homesickness at times, even if she had realised that a return was no longer a practical solution. A similar situation is described by Fiona, who had been in Copenhagen for two years when I met her. After an initial honeymoon phase, during which work colleagues had accommodated Fiona and her husband Andrew in every possible way, the couple was left to themselves. This created a vacuum in their social life, which they had tried to fill by meeting fellow-expatriates through Scottish associations such as the Copenhagen St Andrew's Society. Maureen Guirdham reflects on this second stage of culture shock: "As the buffers reduce, contact occurs and usually anger towards everything and sometimes everyone in the host culture occurs. This is a critical point where the shock can develop into a rejection of the host culture or acceptance and adjustment to new surroundings." (Guirdham 1999: 288) As an example of this, I recall a friend and fellow-Ph.D. student from Iceland, who during the second year of her sojourn in Glasgow became increasingly annoyed with the format of newspapers in Britain. To outsiders, her sense of frustration will appear irrational, but it is a possible symptom of culture shock covering other, and more substantial, cultural differences.

During this phase sojourners and immigrants will often seek the company of their countrymen. They move into the ethnic zone defined by Owe Ronström because ethnic organisations present them with an opportunity to compare notes and seek a confirmation of values and norms threatened by the host culture. The structure of such groupings may be formal or informal and can reflect values other than national ones. In the Scottish example, age and class were determining factors, with older people and professionals joining the St Andrew's Society, while young, working-class Scots opted for an informal membership of Copenhagen Celtic, a football club founded by British expatriates. In my interviews I tried to find out why the Scots would join ethnic societies. I suppose I expected references to more explicit parts of Scottish culture such as kilts, bagpipes, national history, and politics. However, my interviewees conveyed their urge to be confirmed in the implicit aspects of their identity in order to resist the continuous pressure from their surrounding, Danish culture. They had come to realise that the nature of their Scottishness was changing as they adapted to the Danish way of life; they were on their way to becoming everyday Danes and holiday Scots.

I think the sense of anger and frustration is a necessary part of cultural adaptation. It awakens the sojourner from the complacency of the holiday stage and forces him or her to confront fundamental differences in cultural norms and values. The two-year crisis arises from the unanswered questions that have been allowed to accumulate during the first part of the encounter. Questions are an essential part of learning, and the realisation that he or she lacks navigational tools will eventually re-open the sojourner's eyes to the host culture and compel him or her to seek out the required information. Hence I agree with Maureen Guirdham's perception of culture shock as a necessary part of sojourner adaptation (Guirdham 1999: 288).

Stage 3: In a cultural No Man's Land

The borderline between my second stage of culture shock and the third, intercultural phase is blurred. As they gain an inside perspective on their new culture, the frustration felt by sojourners is gradually reduced until it reaches a minimum. I do not think the sense of culture shock will ever disappear completely. In times of crisis sojourners are likely to adopt a cultural explanation, blaming personal, social or economic difficulties on the differences between their native and the host culture. The overlapping of the culture shock and adaptation stages is not clear from Lysgaard's model, as used by Geert Hofstede. "Phase 3, *acculturation*," Hofstede writes, "sets in when the visitor has slowly learned to function under the new conditions, has adopted some of the local practices, finds increased self-confidence, and becomes integrated into a new social network." Phase 3 gives way to the fourth, Hofstede's *stable state*, at the point when "the visitor can be considered to be biculturally adapted."

(Hofstede 2001: 426) A similar division of the acculturation process into four independent stages characterises other theorists drawing on Lysgaard's results. This model presents a simplified version of reality, however, which cannot always account for the real-life situations I encountered in my field work.

In my model of cultural adaptation I combine Hofstede's *acculturation* and *stability* into one phase, the stage of interculturality. This part of the integration process was characterised by Fiona as a "cultural No Man's Land", which refers the feeling among the Scots of sometimes being Danish, other times Scots, but really belonging somewhere between the two cultures. In order to cope with this position, which in a way excludes them from a full membership of their native as well as their host culture, the Scots construct a new identity. Their self-image is inclusive – a "pick 'n mix" identity combining, as my interviewees see it, the best parts of Scottish and Danish culture. The cultural traits involved at this stage are often implicit values and norms, which makes it difficult to determine when exactly sojourners move into the intercultural stage. Such changes occur at the subconscious level and are unlikely to show in a quantitative survey. This is one of the principal arguments in favour of qualitative research although, as I am aware, any results will be based on subjective interpretation – the interviewees' as well the researcher's. Nevertheless, I would like to present three examples of interculturality from the data I collected as well as my own recollections. They illustrate language adjustment, changed behaviours and the emergence of a new set of values.

My first example of language change draws almost exclusively on personal experience, although I have discussed the matter with fellow-sojourners. Some of its manifestations, for instance the "mixed forms" discussed below, resemble language usage by learners in the early stages of language acquisition. In my case, however, it happens to people who are commonly regarded as fluent in their host language as well as their native one, and in this specific context, it indicates that a transformation is taking place at the subconscious level. The first symptom of language change was for me a degree of confusion when a third language was added to my daily mixture of English and Danish. As part of my Danish education I had studied German and Spanish as well as English, and I knew just enough German to get by. When in the summer of 1998, ten months into my stay in Scotland, I was attending a conference in Germersheim, Germany, I found the addition of German to my linguistic pool confusing and suddenly heard myself speaking Danish to my Scottish friends. After a few days I adjusted to my new linguistic setting, but I think this experience shows that I had already at this stage divided my world into a Danish-speaking and an English-speaking one. This linguistic compartmentalisation seems to have been strengthened in the course of my three-year stay. When visiting Denmark in the third year, I would undergo a period of acclimatization, during which I happily employed English words in Danish conversation or indeed combined the two languages. My favourite example, picked up by my family, was "envelut" – a personal blend of the English "envelope" and the Danish term "konvolut". I cannot explain what happened in this situation, but have observed that since my return to Denmark I require a similar period of linguistic adjustment whenever I visit Scotland.

The second example of changing behaviours may be noticed by the sojourners themselves or by their family and friends. It involves explicit and implicit aspects of culture, and often sojourners do not themselves recognise what is going on. Only upon their return to the home country are they confronted with the deviations between their own behavioural patterns and those of their native culture. An example of this is offered by Fiona, who in the interview recalls how on a visit to Britain it dawned upon her that she looked and dressed differently. She was aware of the dress code attached to her professional status in Britain and would put on a business suit in order to blend in with her surroundings. Yet a walk along the beach made her see how she now mixed British formality with Danish pragmatism, wearing flat shoes and a waterproof jacket because they were most suitable in terms of the weather. Fiona's Scottish family and friends are likely to have found her apparel odd. In Scotland young professionals do not wear waterproofs – except if they are on the golf course or in the hills.

My third example – an adoption of norms and values from the host culture – is also the most fundamental transformation, and some theorists deny that this takes place at all. In *Riding the Waves of Culture* Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner claim that "[i]t is our belief that you can never understand other cultures", whereas Hofstede's essentialist concept of culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" does not allow for such a radical change of identity (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2004: 1; Hofstede 2004: 9). Nevertheless, several of the aspects noticed by my interviewees indicate a shift of fundamental beliefs

and values. They are mostly detected by those whose stay in Denmark exceeds five years, which explains why they are ignored by theorists focusing on short-term sojourns only. They are highly significant to the present discussion, however, because they reveal that no cultural values are static. The most common change of values for the Scots is the adoption of a Danish view on gender relations. When comparing Scotland to Denmark, the expatriates describe their home country as an old-fashioned, masculine culture and generally prefer a more equal relationship between man and woman. Danes have a clearer attitude towards their own sexuality, George states, adding that Scottish intolerance in this area would probably prevent him from returning to Scotland. 25 year-old Mary perceives Denmark to be more "modern". Danes express themselves in a more direct, independent way, and living in Denmark, Mary continues, has made her a stronger person. George emphasises how he can no longer communicate with his compatriots on the same level – his accent may be Scots, but his verbal and non-verbal language reflects Danish norms and values.

On the accommodation of other cultures, Edward T. Hall observes in a recent interview: "The key to all of that again is to make your peace with the pain which is real. It doesn't mean that you have given up your identity. So, just like when you learn a new language, you don't lose the old one. When you learn French, it doesn't mean you lose English." (Sorrells 1998: 11) Interculturality may be defined as a combination of two languages, two cultural perspectives, which can leave sojourners stranded between their native and their new culture, but which also enables them to construct a bicultural identity based on the strengths of both.

Learning from practice

The previous discussion has been an attempt to measure the abstract concepts of cultural theory against the very real experiences of cultural adaptation narrated by seven Scottish immigrants in Denmark. There are a number of similarities between the process I describe and the cultural adaptation model presented by the theorists. Yet my data show that reality is not easily compartmentalised, and that boundaries are often blurred. Compared to Lysgaard's theory, as presented above, I want to stress two major differences. First of all, my interviews have left me with the impression that acculturation is a very lengthy process. Although their structural assimilation was fast, the Scots agreed that adaptation only really took off after the culture shock endured during the second year, and that their cultural adjustment never really ended. To my mind, this makes it presumptuous to talk about major transformations during the first couple of years overseas, although I accept the possibility of minor changes. If they go abroad for one or two years only, many sojourners will therefore never move from an initial adjustment of explicit values and norms towards the intercultural stage, which is a shame as such inside knowledge would enable companies to strengthen their international position and market strategies. The second difference concerns the process of acculturation itself. The theorists' description of this development in terms of four stages suggests a sequence of events that will eventually bring the sojourner to Iris Varner and Linda Beamer's stage of integration (Varner and Beamer 2005: 17). What I found in my interviews was that different phases overlap, and that the second stage of culture shock may very well interact with my third phase of interculturality. In fact I believe Varner and Beamer's pattern of euphoria, frustration and adjustment possibly repeats itself several times before sojourners are able to add their fragments of culture together and become intercultural. As things evolve around them, they are unlikely to distinguish between the series of minor culture shocks they are exposed to during the early part of their stay; however, once they have undergone the major identity crisis which I named the two-year crisis, they will know the difference.

This comparison of theory and practice brings me to my final reflections on the lessons that international business may draw from the real-life situations described above. First of all, I want to emphasise that employees will change as a result of their stationing overseas. If we adopt the constructionist view that, as Iben Jensen puts it, "identity is formed in relation to others", we must assume that the removal of an individual from his or her immediate context (i. e. the social groups that we identify ourselves as part of) will inevitably affect this person very deeply (Jensen 2003: 12). The culture of the Other, which in one's native culture was embodied by people of a different class, age or ethnic background, now becomes the predominant cultural values of the host, and in order to survive the sojourner must open him- or herself to a different way of doing things, developing the "mindful" strategy proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey 1999: 45-46).

The second lesson to be drawn from my discussion concerns the length of the acculturation process. I think it is important to realise that cultural assimilation cannot be achieved within a year or two, but requires a longer time-span. I accept that sojourners may not take this long before they are able to manage in their new culture; however, their insight will be confined to relatively few aspects of the host culture, and I doubt that they can provide the comprehensive perspective required to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding. In order to use the intercultural skills developed by sojourners in the course of their integration, I suggest that companies consider a minimum length of three years for international assignments. I am aware that long-term stationing puts off some employees, but if the rewards offered by the company (i. e. in terms of career prospects or economic gains) match the personal investment made by the sojourner, I believe such problems can be resolved. The gains in terms of intercultural competence are substantial. Not only can the sojourner's insider perspective be used to strengthen the company's position in this particular market; he or she will become a human resource that may be enlisted in the training of future sojourners.

Finally, companies that allow their employees to "go native" and move into the intercultural stage must accept a responsibility for them upon their return to the home country. Because they have gained a new cultural perspective, the sojourners may find it difficult to settle into their old ways. They feel they belong to both worlds – or to neither. At this point it is important that companies help these individuals re-establish a sense of belonging. In co-operation with the employees companies may plan for the homecoming, i. e. by setting up different phases in the sojourners' re-integration into the home-office. It is essential that managers and colleagues listen to the sojourners' narratives, allowing them to make the cultural comparisons that are an inevitable part of this process. In return the company obtains an employee with strong intercultural skills, which will be useful in relation to present and future international activities.

Conclusion

To return to my initial assumptions I believe my discussion has shown that 1) cultural adaptation is a lengthy process; 2) Lysgaard's model of acculturation, as employed by cultural theorists, is problematic because it fails to account for the overlapping and blurred boundaries uncovered in my interviews; and 3) companies may strengthen their intercultural competence by stationing employees abroad for a minimum of two or three years. I offer a complementary model of acculturation, containing the stages of arrival, the two-year crisis and interculturality, which to me explains the observations made in the interviews. With regard to methodology I recommend the use of a qualitative approach in spite the weaknesses identified above. In order to check the applicability of cultural theory we need to measure it against real-life situations, which requires the use of individual narratives, told by people who have themselves undergone the process of cultural adaptation.

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