A “Honeymoon” without Honey

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I felt quite homesick when it was the Chinese traditional reunion festival. After my arrival in the United States, I experienced the maladjustment of the new environment. I couldn’t get along well with my new friends because I didn’t know how to assimilate myself into the new social circles. In this paper, I analyze my personal stories based on three important intercultural communication theories: “ethnographic perspectives”, “iceberg concept” and “culture shock”. First, I will use the “ethnographic perspectives” to explain the reason why there are cultural differences. Second, the “iceberg concepts” will show the importance of deep culture when an intercultural communication action occurs. Lastly, I will choose the “culture shock” theory to analyze my personal sufferings.

II. Story

One night I was feeling more homesick than usual because it was the Mid-Autumn Festival in the Chinese lunar calendar, also called the Moon Cake Festival. It is known as one of the most important national festivals in China, much like how Thanksgiving Day is of great importance in America. It is an occasion where all family members get together to have a reunion dinner and appreciate the bright-round moon that symbolizes the family’s gathering. It would be hard for anyone back home to imagine a Chinese person sitting beside a window in an empty library that night. She was missing her celebratory family on the other side of the globe. That young woman was I.

Since my arrival to Orange County, drastic changes turned my life upside down. One of the changes was that I was no longer with the people with whom I was familiar. My friends were thousands of miles away and we could no longer enjoy each other’s company.
The biggest surprise for me was on orientation day, when I learned that I was the first international undergraduate transfer student in the Communication Department since it was founded. This fact alone shows how there are very few international undergraduate students at the University and thus it lacks diversity. However, my Intercultural Communication course helped me broaden my horizons through the introduction of cultural diversity.

Another change in my life was the educational culture and how I had to organize my study times. In all of my courses, students were given a syllabus that expressed the exact requirements of the course. In order for me to meet the requirements as an international student, I needed to pay more attention to the homework assigned and focus on my time management due to the number of upcoming papers and quizzes. On the first day of Intercultural Communication, every student was asked to give a unique self-introduction to their classmates on the first day of class. I found that the students had strong desires to participate in discussions and brainstorm with their peers.

Partying was also an important leisure activity for the typical American youth, an occasion not only for people to dance and drink, but also for them to get to know one another. When I attended parties, very rarely did I engage in a casual conversation with others due to the large cultural differences. I was not familiar with the topics they had discussed and they had no idea about the topics I was interested in either.

The dorm life here was also drastically different from my life in China. Living with my roommate made me feel ignored by others for the first time. I realized that we were two unique individuals and each had her own separate way of life. For example, one evening I went back to the room but discovered she was not in the room. To make sure she was safe, I
text messaged her cell phone asking where she was. Her reply was that she had been at home. At that moment, I felt that my roommate had ignored me. My thoughts were that my roommate at least could have told me where she was going to go for the night. In the Chinese society, roommates are obligated to let the others in the room know their schedules, regardless of the closeness their relationship; for that reason, I worried a great deal about her during nights I did not see my roommate in the dorm.

The isolation did not only exist when I was in my dorm but when I ate dinners. I hated to go to the dining halls. I always saw a group of American people sitting together for meals, which reminded me of the happier times in Beijing with my friends. Sadly, this only made me more miserable. When I made friends with two female students, Amy and Adrena, my poor situation happened to get better. Amy, a freshman, and had the same lonely feelings as I had. Since she was a Japanese American, I felt it was easier to get closer to her. The other student, Adrena, was an American who was very interested in Chinese culture. Seeing I was alone, she easily recognized me as new student of Chapman University. After confirming that I was Chinese, Adrena excitedly shared with me the all of the Chinese TV play series, pop music and movie stars she knew of. What impressed me the most was that she had learned Chinese and could say a few sentences. I was really excited when I heard her speak this familiar language.

These were some of my personal experiences during my first seven weeks since I came to the United States.

III. Theoretical Framework

My first experiences of living and studying abroad not only gave me some special
memories to keep in mind but also indicated that I felt like I was lost in a multitude of cultural differences. There are three main communication theories that enabled me to understand these cultural barriers: “ethnographic perspective,” “iceberg concepts and deep culture,” and “cultural shock.”

Firstly, between the traditional perspective and the constructive perspective, there exists another theoretical framework, the ethnographic perspective, which enables us to see how the intercultural communication works in an empirical way. In the ethnographic perspective, the form of the culture is through a code or image that explains the culture of the people rather than explaining through a group membership or a conversation (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 2005). Ethnography is a force aimed to bring people together regardless of the nature of their background. The ethnographic perspective is used to understand something that is not familiar or recognizable in our usual daily way of life. The ethnographic perspective is unique to its case and field study because it answers all aspects of a particular intercultural interaction (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 2005).

Secondly, the “iceberg concept of culture” indicates the “hidden perspectives” of another culture that are out of the awareness to an outsider. The iceberg concept states that the more involved one becomes in a new culture, the more one finds out how unaware one was of the culture and finds many new discoveries within the culture (Shaules, 2007).

Thirdly, the resulting phenomenon of the ethnography and iceberg conceptions is the concept known as “culture shock”. It is the concept that expresses the difficulty people have in adjusting to a new culture that differs remarkably from their own. When people are in a new and foreign environment, they do not know what to do and how to do adapt to it.
correctly. You will find that my experiences are consistent with its definition. The shock of moving to a foreign country often consists of four distinct phases: honeymoon phase, negotiation phase, adjustment phase and mastery phase (Pedersen, 1995). Usually the sense of losing direction occurs after the first few weeks of settling down in a new place. However, not everyone passes through these phases and not everyone is in the new culture long enough to pass through all four.

IV. Analysis

Although I have traveled extensively to places such as South America, Asia, and Europe, my trip to the United States this time was very different. It was my first time studying abroad. Rooming with an American roommate, eating American food every day, and attending English lectures were all unique and exciting experiences for me. Before, I had experienced diverse cultures in other countries at only a superficial level and nowhere as deep as my stay in America.

My experiences here in America could be applied to the ethnographic perspective to understand another culture. It is a perspective that requires the observer to live in a new culture for a long time and assimilate into the local population (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007). For instance, if I did not take the same classes with American students, I would never have known what American classes discussed, the different ways American and Chinese students thought, and that the professor evaluated students by specific criterions noted on a syllabus.

During the first week of class, I introduced myself five times for each of my five classes and listened to the self-introductions of professors as well. However, in China, there was no time for students to introduce themselves, and professors go straight into the lectures. In my
opinion, other than the reason of difference in classroom size, the biggest cultural difference is individualism compared to collectivism. In American culture, individualism is at the core of the culture, despite your age or background, everyone is given the same platform to perform and express.

Moreover, in the American style class setting, participation is very important. Simply attending class is not sufficient. When a professor asks questions, students here are very passionate about answering, but in China, students are more inclined to keep silent. I think it is also a way that American students demonstrate their identities and let others know their opinions. In China, a very interesting culture exists called the “face culture”. People are more likely to listen to other’s people’s opinion first before sharing any of their any responses. It is because they may “lose face” if they give the wrong answer.

Of course, when we talk about the differences between two countries, we cannot avoid mentioning the cultural differences. Some times, I felt uncomfortable communicating with others due to the culture bias, which could also be a hidden perspective of my deep culture.

I attended a party organized by our classmates. At the party, I could not understand the conversations between my American classmates due to my rare understanding of American deep culture. Everything that was communicated in behaviors and the content of the discussions were all unfamiliar and hard for me to follow.

However, when I talked with the two girls in the dining halls, I was happy and comfortable because we had the same sense of shared cultural identity. Although one of the girls was Japanese-American, we had a similar cultural background. For example we both grew up in a traditional Asian family, which revolved around ancient Confucius values. The
other girl, although was an American girl, she loved Chinese pop culture and could speak some Chinese. Thus, I was so delighted and felt free to talk about everything that we both knew, such as Chinese pop songs and Chinese movie stars.

Step by step, the hidden problems of deep culture will result in a big phenomenon: culture shock, a feeling of uncertainty, confusion or anxiety that people experience when living in a society that is different from their own. This theory is very helpful for me to figure out what kind of state I am in that is normal. “Successful adaption may be achieved in a variety of ways. Similarly, failures of adaption may be dependent on a range of factors and are not solely contingent upon person-related variables, as implied by the clinical approaches to ‘culture shock’ ” (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

V. Discussion

Whether we discuss the ethnographic perspective, the iceberg concept or the theory of culture shock, they all concentrate on the analysis of “deep culture”. This is why I want to stress how important the deep culture is when we try to solve the possible reoccurring problems during intercultural interactions.

Elements of deep culture deal with the feelings and attitudes that we learn by being a member of a particular group. It involves the thoughts, beliefs, personal values, and subtle gradations of interpersonal relationships as expressed in actions and words through daily lifestyle details as it is lived (Pajewski & Enriquez, 1996).

People experience the difference of deep culture unconsciously or unintentionally since deep culture generally works beyond the awareness at the intuitive level and we tend to become and stay unaware of it until confronted with a need to interact with people who have
different cultural assumptions. At the same time, increased contact does not always lead to harmony; it may cause consequences like prejudice, conflict, discrimination and other problems as well (Shaules, 2007).

Culture is very complicated and seems to be moving and changing overtime. Unlike the high culture and folk culture that are primarily in awareness and understand easily, deep culture, on the contrary, is primarily out of our awareness; it proves difficult to catch up and understand, due to a lack of knowledge.

In other words, it is difficult for those who have differences in their respective deep culture of their own to adapt to another different culture. Such occasions would have a tendency to lead to one’s emotional depression called culture shock. When a person is suffering culture shock, he or she would feel upset about experiencing a totally different culture.

**VI. Conclusion**

All in all, there is no doubt that we live in a world filled with diversity, and there is no doubt about the need for communication during our lifetime. It is absolutely necessary to communicate with diverse people from diverse cultures. Nowadays, there are more and more people from all over the world coming to different countries for education, business, or leisure. Once people live in a new country, they will encounter the bias that intercultural communication brings when they are presented a new environment. I, studying abroad in a foreign country, am the perfect example. The bias of intercultural communication is not intimidating. Once we begin to learn a new culture, we can choose to accept the culture, or reject the culture, but the only thing we cannot do is to ignore the culture.
References


