The use of models to explain the cultural adaptation process is invaluable because they show that many of the challenges one encounters during an intercultural experience are normal and can be expected. They also allow sojourners to prepare for such challenges by developing constructive coping strategies in advance.

It is necessary to take multiple models into consideration when explaining or analyzing the adaptation process, as the adjustment challenges presented in a single model do not necessarily exist in every individual or situation, nor does any one model address all aspects of the cultural adaptation process.

THE ABC’S OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Colleen Ward, an expert on acculturation, has defined three adaptation frameworks: 1) stress and coping, 2) culture learning and 3) social identification. These are often referred to as the ABCs of intercultural encounters because they emphasize the Affective (feelings), Behavioral (actions) and Cognitive (knowledge) aspects of cultural adaption processes, respectively. Below, divided into frameworks, are descriptions of several well-known and internationally accepted models.

STRESS AND COPING: AFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

The stress and coping framework focuses on the affective components of the adaptation process. Topics pertaining to this framework include coping mechanisms for acculturation stress and culture shock.

U- AND W-CURVE MODELS OF INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT (OBERG; GULLAHORN & GULLAHORN)

The U-Curve model, developed by Kalvero Oberg (1960), utilizes the form of the letter “U” to describe the emotional ups and downs that occur during intercultural sojourns. It applies to the time spent in a foreign culture and suggests that a sojourner begins her/his intercultural experience with high spirits, yet drops to a more negative state after the initial “honeymoon” period ends, eventually regaining a positive perspective as s/he becomes more comfortable in the host culture.

The W-Curve, created by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), simply adds another “U” to the U-Curve model. This second U depicts the sojourner’s experience upon her/his return home. It suggests that, once home, s/he again experiences a negative emotional dip during the re-entry process, but regains a positive outlook as time passes. The U- and W-Curves are an attractive way to show general emotional ups and downs that occur during the sojourn; however, they are not applicable to everyone’s experience.
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION MODELS (C. WARD)

Colleen Ward, together with other theorists, has criticized the U- and W-Curve models because she has found that cultural adjustment does not always include a “honeymoon” phase and that, in fact, distress (or culture shock) is frequently highest in the beginning of the sojourn. Instead, Ward has promoted the following models (2001), which occur simultaneously:

**PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION**

At the beginning of a sojourn, a person must make many personal adjustments: get used to the new environment, process new impressions, build relationships and learn how to manage new tasks at work or school. These psychological adaptations can cause stress and, for many, a high level of anxiety. The curve of psychological adaptation shows a person’s level of comfort in her/his new environment over time. According to Ward’s research, in most cases sojourners experience the least comfort upon arrival. Adaptation increases continuously within the first four months of the sojourn, and eventually stabilizes with only minor variation over the remaining period. This suggests there is a need for those who provide support to sojourners to concentrate efforts especially in the beginning of the intercultural experiences.

**SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION**

In contrast to psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation describes the increasing ability of a sojourner to effectively interact with members of her/his host society. This includes acquiring culture specific communication and interaction skills, as well as learning to speak the target language if it is different. Acquiring knowledge about the norms and values in the host society is also a part of sociocultural adaptation.

The longer a sojourner stays in the host country, the stronger her/his sociocultural adaptation becomes; however, after six months, Ward’s work suggests there may not be any additional significant learning, which is why the curve decreases in this model. Like with psychological adaptation, this model strongly demonstrates the need for significant support for sojourners during the first six months of their intercultural experience.

**TRANSITION MODEL (W. BRIDGES)**

The Transition model, by William Bridges (1933) depicts all transitions (in our case, cultural adjustments) as having three phases, beginning with 1) an ending phase, or letting go of the familiar, and is associated with a feeling of sadness. Next is 2) the neutral zone, where s/he emotionally disconnects from the past. A person in this phase is neither excited nor sad, and often feels a mixture of anxiety, curiosity, and skepticism. Eventually, the sojourner advances to 3) a new beginning when s/he is emotionally able to accept and welcome the change. In the case of cultural adaptation, this could mean embracing the new culture. Although only one stage predominates at a time, Bridges argues that all three stages are present simultaneously throughout the entire adaptation process.

There are three things that Bridges advises every counselor do when assisting a sojourner in her/his transition process: 1) show concern for this person’s feelings and thoughts, 2) communicate very clearly what will happen and where the transition will lead, and 3) try to connect to the sojourner, for example, by telling about a similar situation the counselor experienced and how s/he dealt with it.
STRESS-ADAPTATION-GROWTH MODEL (Y.Y. KIM)

The Stress-Adaptation-Growth model, by Young Yun Kim (2001), proposes that cultural adaptation and personal growth happen gradually, in a spiral-like process. The sojourner alternates between stressful experiences and the eventual growth and adaptation that result from the challenge. Each successive stressful situation takes the sojourner to a higher level of adaptation. The message of this model is that the challenges sojourners face are important for personal growth and it is by experiencing difficulties that we learn and adapt, or, in other words, grow. With time, adaptation becomes easier. As the spiral advances, less and less stress is experienced, and more and more adaptation is achieved.

CULTURAL LEARNING: BEHAVIORAL DEVELOPMENT

Cultural learning, the behavioral framework, refers to the process of acquiring necessary social knowledge and skills in order to thrive in the new culture. These include language fluency, appropriate non-verbal communication, social etiquette and factual information.

MODEL OF DECULTURATION AND ACCULTURATION OVER TIME (Y.Y. KIM)

The model of Deculturation and Acculturation Over Time, by Young Yun Kim (2001), demonstrates how, as the sojourner spends more time in the host culture, s/he incorporates more aspects of that culture into her/his beliefs, behaviors and values. Eventually, the sojourner “re-arranges their mental furniture” such that their worldview adjusts to accommodate both new and old cultural values, norms and behaviors, resulting in a new construct. It takes many years of considerable exposure to a new culture for someone to achieve Time 3. It is useful to keep in mind that, for most sojourners, the time spent abroad helps them move from Time 1 to Time 2, and that they should not expect to achieve complete acculturation unless they are exposed to and engage in the other culture for a prolonged period.

DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY (M. BENNETT)

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), by Milton Bennett (1993), visualizes cultural adaptation in relation to attitudes and behavior toward cultural difference. The scale progresses from ethnocentric approaches to cultural differences (the most extreme stage being denial of the existence of other cultures) to ethnorelative approaches (where one is able to distinguish, be comfortable with and even adapt to cultural differences). Studies have shown that the majority of people around the world are either in Defense or Minimization. See the document DMIS Development Tasks (2012) for more information on how to develop appropriate support and learning activities for people at these stages of the DMIS.

SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION: COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Lastly, social identification, the cognitive framework, looks at how individuals or groups view themselves and the effects of stereotypes and discrimination on their identity. It is concerned with the shifting of individual, cultural and social identities, a process that occurs unavoidably during an intercultural experience.
The Transitional Experience model, by Peter S. Adler (1975), focuses on the changes that occur to one’s identity during cultural adjustment. The process begins with the initial contact with the new culture. The newness leads to a period of disintegration, where the sojourner feels confusion and disorientation. S/he becomes increasingly conscious of differences in beliefs, behaviors and values between the home and host cultures and this can lead to reintegration, or a rejection of the host culture. As the sojourner develops coping skills and language fluency, her/his comfort level with the host culture increases and s/he progresses to a stage of autonomy. The final stage, independence, is marked by acceptance and sensitivity to cultural differences and similarities. This model is valuable for counselors, as it emphasizes how increased coping and language skills help sojourners move out of reintegration and into autonomy.

The Double-Swing model, by Muneo Yoshikawa (1987), also known as the Möbius Integration Philosophy, uses the first four stages of Adler’s model above. However, after reaching autonomy, a person does not advance to independence but rather moves into the “double-swing” image portrayed to the left. Sojourners at this final stage are sensitive, open and responsive to cultural differences; yet, at the same time, interactions with these differences still create emotional crises. The sojourner moves between intercultural acceptance and crisis, generating continuous growth. This model is dynamic, suggesting that a person never reaches the “end” of cultural adaptation. This model serves as a reminder to those who provide support to sojourners that although a sojourner may benefit from additional support toward the start of her/his intercultural experience, s/he will continue to encounter crises throughout.

CONCLUSIONS

These are just some of the models that can be used to explain the cultural adjustment process. There is no perfect model for such a complex process and each of those presented here helps us to explain a different aspect of cultural adaptation, from an affective, behavioral or cognitive perspective. It is beneficial for people who provide support to sojourners to be familiar with several models, in order to apply the most appropriate one to a specific context.

Cultural Adaptation Models ...

- vary in how they present the processes of cultural adaptation: there is not just one perfect model.
- make the abstract concrete, often providing a visual for understanding cultural adaptation processes.
- cover the ABCs: the Affective, Behavioral and Cognitive elements of cultural adaption.
- allow sojourners to be supported in ways that are appropriate for a specific context and individual, by taking a variety of models into consideration.

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