COMMUNICATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION: AN INTEGRATIVE THEORY

Young Yun Kim

*In celebration of human spirit that reaches for
the unknown and embraces the unfamiliar*

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and
Cross-Cultural
Adaptation

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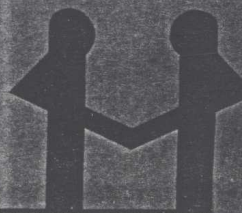
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Preface

It was about a decade ago that my academic journey into the field of cross-cultural adaptation began. As a graduate student from Korea working on doctoral research in communication at Northwestern University, I was drawn to this inquiry by a deeply felt need to understand the cultural changes that I had experienced. What happens when individuals, born and raised in one culture, settle into a new culture? How do we cope with the uncertainties of the new environment? Why are some of us more successful than others in adapting to the changed life conditions?

I have engaged myself with these questions since then, and have become acquainted with the approaches of investigators in anthropology, communication, psychology, sociology and sociolinguistics. The field of cross-cultural adaptation can be overwhelming to many researchers due to its vastness, complexity and disjointedness. Although the field has benefitted from the richness and diversity of approaches, it suffers from the application of divergent disciplinary viewpoints by different investigators. Each conceptual model emphasises different aspects of the adaptation experiences. Employing labels such as 'acculturation', 'adjustment', 'assimilation' and 'integration', varied sets of factors are presented with only occasional cross-referencing. Often, researchers observe different 'independent' and 'dependent' variables without providing compelling theoretical reasons for doing so.

Recently, two anthologies have been published with an exclusive focus on the theme, cross-cultural adaptation. The first book, *Acculturation* (Padilla, 1980), presents articles that explore the dimensions and analyses of research findings on psychological experiences of immigrants. The second book, *Cross-cultural Adaption* (Y. Kim & Gudykunst, 1987), is a multidisciplinary anthology that presents current conceptualisations and research findings from anthropological, communication, and social psychological perspectives. These two publications have helped 'push' the field toward a greater integration of perspectives in describing and explaining the cross-cultural adaptation phenomenon.

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The present volume follows these efforts to propose a single theoretical framework incorporating some of the major existing approaches. Based on a systems perspective and a communication focus, this theory utilises research findings across several disciplines. It thus explicates a set of constructs (and their empirical indicators) and interrelates them into an explanatory scheme linking personal and social communication patterns of individual immigrants and sojourners, their adaptive predisposition, and host environmental characteristics. In presenting this theory, divergent conceptualisations have been incorporated into a multidimensional model, with their respective 'places' clarified.

The present theory is claimed to be neither complete (in reflecting all existing theoretical perspectives) nor completed (in the sense of being 'finalised' in its form). Rather, it is offered as an up-to-date synthesis of viewpoints across disciplines based on a perspective broader than what has been available in the past. The theory reflects a belief that, to paint a realistic and useful picture of cross-cultural adaptation, we need to employ concepts at a higher level of abstraction and broaden our horizons to include as many different conceptual angles as possible.

I present this volume with a special joy of understanding my own adaptive metamorphosis. Responsibility for this book's content is solely mine, but several individuals have made important contributions to its making. I thank the Intercommunication Series editors, Howard Giles and Cheris Kramarae, for emphasising 'balanced INTERdisciplinary endeavors' of 'interdisciplinary souls'. They initially welcomed this book into the series, and have furnished me with encouragement and insightful comments. Five colleagues — Charles R. Berger, William B. Gudykunst, Michael W. Purdy, Brent D. Ruben and Stella Ting-Toomey — reviewed the manuscript at different stages of its completion and suggested many useful ideas. I also thank Gordon Craigo who gave so many of his hours for checking and rechecking of the drafts. My final appreciation goes to the publisher, Multilingual Matters, for its dedication to issues that interfuse many linguistic and cultural groups of the world.

Young Yun Kim

PART I

INTRODUCTION

1 CONTEXTS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

You cannot step into the same river twice,
for fresh water is forever flowing towards you.
Heraclitus of Ephesus

Time and again, humans have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to cope with, and overcome, difficulties. Devastated by disastrous events such as war and natural calamities, people rise again and continue living under changed circumstances. Prisoners of war survive for many months and years under the most severe conditions. We readjust to life after the death of loved ones, and in the end deal with our own death. Many times we triumph over changes by coming out of hardship with a strengthened life force and a broadened and deepened understanding of self, others, and human conditions. In the words of Thayer (1975), 'Man [woman] is the most plastic of all earth's creatures' (p. 237).

Today, we are experiencing change in more dramatic ways than ever before, as has been articulated by Toffler (1970, 1980), Capra (1982), and others. Today's change is swift, fundamental, and unprecedented in scale, shaking even the most basic human conditions. It moves us to new technologies, new social structures, new values, new politics, and new human relations. Even in tribal and traditional societies, change has encroached upon nearly every stable pattern of life — cultural values, the structure and functions of the family, and the relations between generations. Toffler (1970) coined the term 'future shock' to describe the stress and disorientation to which many people are subjected in coping with too much change. The complexity, diversity, and rapid pace of change makes us 'strangers' in our own society. As Morrow (1985) has put it, 'Everyone is an immigrant in time, voyaging into the future' (p. 25).

Parallel to such technological-cultural change is the increasing movement of individuals from one society to another. More people are moving than ever before, crossing the cultural boundaries that separate the life patterns of peoples. In a single year, millions around the world relocate. In this human flow across national and cultural boundaries, there are diplomats and other intergovernmental agency employees, business men and women on international assignments, researchers working in cultures other than their own, professors and students attending conferences and academic institutions overseas, military personnel on foreign duty, and missionaries carrying out their religious services. Then there are the tens of millions of refugees and immigrants on the move across societal boundaries — in search of peace, freedom, security, and social, economic, or cultural betterment. (See Brislin, 1981; Dyal & Dyal, 1981; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Taft, 1977 for more detailed discussions of various contexts of cross-cultural migration.)

Mass movements of individuals across cultural boundaries have been on the rise throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the nineteenth century, impoverished workers, including many craftsmen and skilled workers displaced by advances in the technical division of labor, fled from Europe, flocking to the United States and colonies of the European powers. Between 1800 and 1914, net emigration from Europe was estimated at 50 million (Standing, 1984:15). In 1984 alone, more than half a million legal immigrants came to the United States, largely from Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Today, about one-fourth the population of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are foreign-born immigrants and their children. European countries, particularly England, France, Germany, and Austria, also have seen a large influx of Turkish, Portuguese, and Spanish migrant workers since the 1960's. Over three million non-whites are estimated to reside in France and about the same number in England. In Sweden, there are more than 100,000 Turks and slightly fewer Moroccans, and more recently Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Poles. As a result, one in eight people in Sweden is now foreign-born or the offspring of immigrants. In Germany, there are reportedly 175,000 Austrians, 109,000 Dutch, 602,000 Italians, 174,000 Spaniards, 106,000 Portuguese, 301,000 Greeks, 632,000 Yugoslavs, and a large unspecified number of Turks (cf. Foster & Stockley, 1984; Meznaric, 1984; Phizacklea, 1984).

In the 1970's, massive numbers of political and economic refugees moved from Southeast Asia and other places to various countries around the world. Over 50,000 Soviet Jews moved from the Soviet Union to Israel

and the United States between 1970 and 1979. Approximately one million refugees — mostly from Southeast Asia, and some from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Central and South American nations — arrived in the United States between 1975 and 1983 (Kerpin, 1984). In the African continent, there are reportedly close to 143,000 Banyarwanda living in Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, and approximately four million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan. One-fifth to one-fourth of Afghanistan's population is reported to live in exile. All in all, a total of 1,898,000 refugees entered and resettled in a country other than their own home country between 1975 and 1983 (US Committee for Refugees, 1984:4–9, 40).

The focus: adaptation of international migrants

Cross-cultural movement, indeed, has become a common place of our time. The pervasiveness of the movements of people across societies, along with the technological and social changes within societies, requires that we cope with numerous situations to which our previous experience simply does not apply. Learning to live with uncertainty has become one of the central challenges of our time. Regardless of the unique idiosyncrasies of individuals in their cross-cultural responses, many international migrants who travel in both time and geographical space experience an acute 'existential alertness', bringing a special significance to the term adaptation. Numerous people struggle to cope with the feelings of inadequacy and frustration in the changed environment: some resist change and fight for the old ways, others desperately try to 'go native', often experiencing a sense of failure and despair. Whether for a long or short term, international migration represents a situation where the newly arrived strangers are required to cope with substantial cultural change.

Of course, situations of international migration vary in the abruptness of the transition. For example, a sudden cultural transition was experienced by many Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. Due to the involuntary and traumatic nature of their departure, most had little chance to prepare themselves psychologically for life in the new country. Particularly during the initial resettlement phase, many suffered from a deep psychological dislocation and sense of loss (cf. Y. Kim, 1980). Even when the transition is voluntary, international migrants differ in their motivation to adapt to the new environment and to make the host society their 'second home'. (Hereinafter, the term 'immigrants' will refer to all long-term migrants including refugees, except when different migrant

groups need to be identified separately.)

This motivation to adapt depends largely on the degree of permanence of the new residence. For immigrants, the move from their original culture to the host society is permanent, or is regarded as such at least initially. Although some may eventually return to their homeland, most immigrants are committed to the new society in the sense that it is now the setting for the conduct of their lives. Being full participants in that society for better or worse, they are unlikely to be able to segregate themselves from frequent contact with host nationals. Because of the necessity to make a living and attain social membership in the host society, most immigrants must be concerned with their relationship to the environment in a way similar to the native population.

For many short-term sojourners, on the other hand, contact with the new culture is only peripheral. Reasons for a sojourn in a new culture are often very pragmatic and specific — to pursue a vocation, to obtain a degree, or merely to enhance one's prestige in the eyes of the folks back home. This may require less overall commitment to the host cultural system (Taft, 1977:126). Foreign students, for example, can reduce their cultural adaptation to the bare minimum required to fulfill their role as a student and may confine their social contact to fellow students from their home country. A similar observation can be made about military personnel and their families in foreign countries, and about migrant workers as well.

Regardless of the specific situational demands, however, *all individuals in a changing and changed cultural environment share common adaptation experiences*. All are 'strangers' to their host society and cannot completely ignore the demands of the new life setting. To a greater or lesser extent, all must cope with a high level of uncertainty and unfamiliarity as they are in an ambivalent status. Temporarily at least, they are between two worlds — the familiar milieu of their original culture and their new locus in the host society. Many of the behavioral modes useful in the old setting may prove maladaptive in the new. As Schuetz (1944/1963) described:

> the cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master. (p. 108)

Sooner or later, the immigrants and sojourners come to better structure, or make sense of, personally relevant situations in the host society. To handle the transactions of daily living requires the ability to

detect similarities and differences between the surrounding host culture and the home culture. They gradually become acquainted with the aspects of living in the host culture: from maintaining basic survival necessities — physical safety and health — to working for their livelihood, developing relationships, and enjoying leisure activities. They become increasingly proficient in handling daily activities in the new culture, with improved skills to deal with situations they encounter.

Countless immigrants and sojourners, from the beginning of history, have adapted to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment. Some of them, of course, have not been so successful, have returned to their home cultures prematurely, or have found themselves with less than 'healthy' mental and social functioning. A few may never feel completely adequate, and in control of their lives, in the new culture. By and large, however, people learn to adequately manage their changed circumstances so that their daily life is not seriously impaired by their 'foreignness'. To this effect, numerous personal stories of various short-term and long-term experiences of adaptive change have been told. The following excerpts from the diary of a former American Peace Corps volunteer, Vicki Holmsten (in *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1978, Section 1, p. 10) succinctly testify to human resilience in the face of cross-cultural challenge.

> *December 12, 1975* — I am visiting the town that I have been assigned to — it's in the bush! A small town called Foequellie, it's about 27 miles and an hour of dirt roads out of Gbarnga, the Bong County capital. Here I am to spend the next two years. To be honest, I have a bad case of culture shock. Not much English spoken in town — the language is Kpelle, the people here mostly of the tribe of the same name. No electricity. Kerosene lamps and battery-run radios seem to be modern touches. The running water is provided by the houseboy who brings the buckets from the well.

> *January 5, 1976* — Why am I doing this? Why, why, why? We stayed in Monrovia long enough to shop for household necessities, then the members of our group took off for various parts of the country . . . . I move into a house in Foequellie and wait for school to begin.

> *February 19, 1976* — Rice, rice, rice. If I see another bowl of rice . . . We eat rice everyday.

> *March 17, 1976* — When you're sick you want to go home because there's nothing worse than being in a steamy jungle clearing when your entire body is hurting . . . . So you travel to the hospital where you will be shuffled through lines with crying babies, weary-eyed children, and

puffy-faced old ladies. Hours of waiting, waiting in lines that couldn't possibly make sense or lead to anything.

May 11, 1976 — What is it all for? I don't know. One of my students is dying. Life and death, the essence here. It's getting enough food to keep going and watching people die because there's no way to prevent it. I'm hurting very badly. Am I doing the right thing by being here? I know I'm not doing my best, I'm not even sure what that is anymore.

October 17, 1976 — I think I am only just now coming to terms with Africa. It is a very alive place. Life-giving and deadly at the same time. Life and death all out in the open, nothing muted or subtle. I am excited to be a part of it. I will never be African, but I am a part of it because I am investing myself in the future of the continent. One small part of Africa is mine, I am in one small part African.

January 16, 1977 — Eleven months to go. I'm sure now that I can do it. Positive feelings about being here. Good ideas about what to do in my teaching, the ability and self-confidence to implement them that are gradually coming with experience.

March 25, 1977 — Today I ate roasted termites. Not bad.

September 10, 1977 — I'm enjoying life here now. I finally belong, I'm accepted. I am at last Vicki Holmsten to the people of Foequellie, not the 'Peace Corps volunteer'. It's almost time for me to leave. I'm not sure I really want to.

September 25, 1977 — When I go to Monrovia, the first stop is always for hamburgers and ice cream. But if I'm there for more than two days, I get really hungry for my accustomed daily bowl of rice, and end up in a chop shop with an enormous serving of rice in front of me.

December 6, 1977 — I'm sad to be going home but nevertheless feel that the time is ripe. The school had a going away party for me Saturday night. It was absurdly perfect. People all over the house, palm wine, tear-jerking farewell speeches, appropriate exits and entrances at calculated moments. I was presented with a beautiful African country cloth robe — it is probably the most precious thing I will ever own. It's over now, time to pack up and go.

Personal accounts such as the above have been told by countless immigrants and sojourners all over the world — mostly among their families, friends and relatives. These stories provide endless illustrations *of the remarkable ability of human beings to carry on life when completely estranged from the familiar environment of their home country. Thus we*

see today Nordics, Southern Europeans, Latin Americans, and Asiatics who have settled in New York, London, Paris, Montreal, and Sydney who eat the same food, wear the same kind of clothing, use the same style of furniture, and enjoy the same television program at the same hour. In rural Africa, blue-eyed Peace Corps volunteers and dark-skinned natives work on irrigation projects side-by-side. In Monterey Park, California, we have a Chinese-born woman as mayor, and her five-member city council includes two Hispanics and a Filipino-American.

Organisation of the book

There can be little dispute, among scientists and non-scientists alike, that cross-cultural adaptation takes place in individuals. Our present concern, therefore, is not *whether* individuals adapt, but *how*. This book is an attempt to describe and explain this issue, building on what has been previously articulated in various human-behavioral-social sciences about the cross-cultural adaptation process. (The term, human sciences, will be used throughout this book to represent all sciences of human behavior in social contexts.) It does so by *presenting an integrative, multidimensional theory that identifies patterns that are commonly and consistently present in the adaptation of individuals*. In this book, the term, adaptation, is used in a broad and general sense to refer to the internal transformation of an individual challenged by a new cultural environment in the direction of increasing fitness and compatibility in that environment. This working definition accommodates all other similar terms such as acculturation, assimilation, and adjustment that have been frequently used in different human science disciplines. (Details of the meaning of adaptation are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.)

The proposed theory is based on the General Systems perspective that regards individual immigrants and sojourners as *open systems* interacting with a given cultural environment that is different from the home culture in which they were born and raised. The theory further views cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic *communication* process. The individual and the host environment are considered to co-determine the course and outcome of the adaptation process through various communication activities. Within the open systems perspective and the communication focus, the theory integrates existing conceptualisations of cross-cultural adaptation as well as pertinent empirical findings in the human sciences including anthropology, communication, sociolinguistics, social psychology, sociology, psychiatry, and related disciplines. In addition, the theory attempts to