

CULTURE JOLTS

DEFINITION OF CULTURE

“An historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, myths and rituals, but means of which people communicate, perpetuate and share their knowledge about and attitudes towards life

OR

“A pattern of meanings accepted by a group of people.” (Arbuckle)

OR

“The way a group of people, over a long period of time, have used their imagination and their ingenuity to work on their environment to meet their basic human needs. The environment is partly physical, partly social and partly ideational.” (Hally)

The PHYSICAL environment is a given and leads to the development of appropriate technology for the use of resources, production and distribution. The SOCIAL environment is a totally human creation of a complex set of patterned relationships, which are closely interrelated with the technology. More important than the physical or social is the IDEATIONAL environment. Everyone is born into an ideational environment made up of the assumptions, values and goals, which ancestors have worked out in trying to deal with the basic questions of existence. These find expression in the SYMBOLIC SYSTEM, which gives them meaning and holds them together. LANGUAGE AND MYTHS are critical aspects of the symbolic system. People have to believe that their way of life is reasonably good and their contribution worthwhile in maintaining its social and economic structures. The language and myths carry messages that impart this sense of rightness, and as they are learned and internalised they establish acceptable and predictable patterns of thought and behaviour and give them meaning. (Hally) Life is manageable because it is predictable and it is predictable because beliefs about its meaning are not only shared but have entered the subconscious and shaped the basic assumptions, values and goals out of which the society operates. These basic assumptions and values are so deeply internalised that any structural change in the culture can only happen through them.

In its day-to-day interactions every culture draws heavily upon its symbolic system, impregnated with meaning, to maintain its economic and social structures. There are signs and cues of social intercourse that include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to a vast range of situations: when and how to greet people, to accept invitations, to agree to disagree, to take statements seriously, to negotiate a contract, how to deal with authority or how to make a purchase. There are bodily postures, gestures, facial expressions, degrees of distance and eye contact that are essential to effective communication. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency upon hundreds of these cues being stored in our subconscious and any one or any number of them coming into play immediately it is required. In other words, we know how to act appropriately in most situations and our knowledge is based upon a felt sense of rightness, which others share.

Upon entering another culture most of these familiar cues are removed and the ordinary events of every day are now experienced as peculiar, strange, extraordinary, quaint, interesting, illogical, impractical, amusing...certainly different... and the new-comer becomes an “observer of culture”. This period can be quite tolerable, even exciting. It is likened by some writers to a honeymoon in which the fascination with the newness carries the new-comer on a

high of delight. There's a certain charm in watching this display of human behaviour and imagining oneself part of such an exotic enterprise.

Gradually, however, the truth starts to come home that all is not well. Feelings of frustration and anxiety replace those of delight. The loss of one's cultural pattern of meaning and order creates to varying degrees a sense of disorientation. The source of verification one's worthwhileness in society is lost and there is no way of finding it in the new culture. There is a profound sense of being a stranger in a strange land with it comes an admixture of sadness, loneliness, hostility and homesickness. Each one handles this differently but there are some common reactions that are worth noting.

The most obvious reaction is fatigue. Besides trying to accommodate itself to climate, food and germs for which it has no immunity the body carries a load of loss of self-esteem. It starts to feel useless, worthless, dead inside, it loses its 'get up and go' because there is no meaning in whatever it goes to, or it can complain through headaches, backaches, tummy upsets and pains in the neck.

Another reaction is criticism, comparisons and blaming, "This is a crazy system." "They waste so much time with all their silly rituals." The way things are done in the home culture is so much better than what goes on here. "You don't know what anyone is thinking. They never give a straight answer to a straight question?" "Haven't they heard of queues?" "It's their fault that I am not managing." "They never understand." "They don't have any sense of responsibility." "They're always late." "They always get it wrong."

This can turn into much more rational arguments and discussion about what would be "good of these people" but it is the same sense of vulnerability and insecurity that attacks for inside there is an awful sense of unease and uncertainty- a longing for things to be different.

Another common reaction is distraction by irrelevant activities: story telling that doesn't apply to the situation, hours of reading, endless letter writing and phone calls, inappropriate humour. All or which are hiding a deeply felt sense of meaninglessness, futility and that nobody understands or cares.

There are numberless other ways in which people can act out this painful period of cultural adjustment. It is like living in a void, caught in a meaningless gap between what has been and what is yet to be. Painful and strange as it may feel it is perfectly normal and holds within itself the potential to become the threshold of entry into new perceptions of life and meaning.

The jarring experiences that lead to cultural adjustment can come under the general heading of CULTURE JOLTS: the more or less intense experiences of disorientation that arise from loss of effective communication skills and ignorance of the implicit meanings in the symbolic system of every day interaction. As stated before they are normal, healthy reactions. However, it is critical that they be acknowledged and dealt with if the cultural experience is to become a source of new meanings, new perceptions and new energy.

For most people the simplest way of dealing with them is to share them with someone who has had enough experience to know what they are going through and who will give them time to laugh and weep away their hurts and fears. Peer support also can be immensely helpful provided it knows how to draw on a wider experience and knowledge.