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THE CULTURE ASSIMILATOR: AN APPROACH
TO CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

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Abstract

The construction of self-administered programmed culture training
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provide an apparently effective method for assisting members of one culture
to interact and adjust successfully with members of another culture. Culture
Assimilators have been constructed for the Arab countries, Iran, Thailand,
Central America and Greece. The paper describes the steps involved in the
development of these programs, as well as briefly reviewing studies validat-
ing the Culture Assimilator programs under laboratory and field conditions.

THE CULTURE ASSIMILATOR:

AN APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING[1]

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Interaction among persons belonging to different culture groups is becoming increasingly common as efforts toward political and economic integration, international cooperation, and technical assistance become more frequent. The literature concerned with stereotyping, interpersonal attitudes, and behavior in culturally heterogeneous groups, suggests that interaction across cultural barriers produces substantial difficulties (e.g., Fiedler, et al., 1961: Fiedler, 1966: Rombauts, 1962: for a review see Triandis, 1967). A recent Handbook of Cross-Cultural Training (Wight, 1969) surveys a large number of approaches which have been proposed to overcome these difficulties. Since most of these approaches have not been subjected to rigorous evaluation, little is known about their effectiveness. One method which has been evaluated and which also seems to produce useful results, is the Culture Assimilator. The present report is a description and evaluation of this training procedure.

The Culture Assimilator[2] is a programmed learning experience designed to expose members of one culture to some of the basic concepts, attitudes, role perceptions, customs, and values of another culture. There is no single culture assimilator· different assimilators are needed for each pair of cultures. Given cultures A, B, and C, we could have assimilators telling A

about B, B about A, A about C, C about A, etc. Furthermore, assimilators can be general or specific; that is, they may train an individual to behave effectively in a very narrow set of social situations, such as in a hospital or as a community development worker, or for a broad group of social situations. The content of assimilators can also vary a good deal. Some assimilators emphasize the interpersonal attitudes that contrast the learner's culture and the target culture; other assimilators emphasize the customs of the target culture; and still others concentrate on the value contrasts of the two cultures. Research to date has not progressed sufficiently to know which kind of assimilator is maximally useful in which type of social situation. However, the results we can review here suggest that a balanced assimilator containing an equal number of general and specific items, and concerned with each of the above areas of content does improve interpersonal interaction in heterocultural settings.

Preparation for work overseas varies from giving a man a two-page pamphlet to several years of preparation. This training will vary depending on the organization, the type of work, and the available time to provide training. Such preparation is a key component in the in-country training of Peace Corps volunteers, while it is very limited in the case of most business organizations. The Culture Assimilator is designed primarily for personnel with limited time and who, therefore, would normally receive little or no training. It is designed to provide the trainee with extensive information about the culture in a two- to five-hour time span.

In order to provide such information it is necessary to select those areas of culture contrast which make the largest impact on social behavior across cultural barriers. This requires an exceptionally good understanding of the two cultures. Such understanding can be obtained by examination of existing ethnographies and historical records, as well as by analyses of the "subjective cultures" of the two cultural groups.

By subjective culture we mean the characteristic way in which a cultural group perceives and responds to its social environment. Triandis (1967, 1968, 1970) and his co-workers have developed a number of methods for the cross-cultural study of perception and cognition. The typical study involves

representative samples of the population of each country. Each respondent
is asked a large number of psychophysical-type questions, requiring sentence
completions, ratings, comparisons, rank-orderings, the selection of the
"best" response from a list, and so on. Care is taken to ask a representa-
tive set of questions, concerning a representative sample of social objects.
The information is analyzed by means of multivariate methods, particularly
factor analysis and analysis of variance, to determine the major dimensions
of social perception and cognition used in each culture and the extent to
which these dimensions influence a wide variety of responses. An examina-
tion of the relationships among such data normally reveals some themes or
typical culture-determined viewpoints, which can be communicated as repre-
sentative generalizations about that culture. The assimilator can then focus
on those important themes and omit details about the other culture that cannot
be easily learned in a short time.

The main problem in the development of the Culture Assimilator, as well
as any culture training program, is: how can we meaningfully simulate inter-
cultural interactions? There are innumerable ways of learning about another
culture. Most methods involving paper and pencil or books make the trainee
a passive observer. Yet the heterocultural encounter is by definition an
active process. The participants must continually evaluate, interpret, and
react, and again evaluate the effect of their reactions. We were, therefore,
committed to an instructional program which made the trainee an active participant
in the learning process.

Granted that no book or reading situation will be able to provide ideal
simulation experiences, programmed instruction does have the advantage of
forcing the individual to interpret and evaluate various situations and to
assimilate immediate feedback on the adequacy and accuracy of his interpretation.

Basically, the method described calls for the student to read a short
episode of an intercultural encounter, and to give an interpretation of the
encounter. The program gives an explanation of why his answer was correct or
incorrect. If the latter, the trainee is asked to go back to the episode, re-
read the material, and choose again. The procedure is thus quite simple, and
the overwhelming majority of trainees find it very stimulating and enjoyable.

In contrast, the development of an effective and well-written Culture Assimilator is a rather complex process. The following sections attempt to provide a guide for the construction of these instruments.

Steps in the Development of Culture Assimilators

Selection of Content

One basic premise of all Culture Assimilators is that the critical problems in heterocultural encounters occur in areas in which there are the greatest divergencies in norms, customs, and values between two cultures. Where no differences exist, there will be little cause for conflict. The problem is thus one of identifying the culturally critical concepts and behaviors, and in providing the trainee with a series of experiences in which he must symbolically cope with them. A number of methods have been used to identify these "critical" concepts and behaviors. The analysis of subjective culture, briefly mentioned earlier, is one of these approaches. Another concerns the analysis of critical incidents.

Critical Incidents. The critical incident technique was originally developed by Flanagan (1949), and is defined as consisting ". . . of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles . . . . By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its affects."

Flanagan utilized the critical incident technique for the investigation of effective and ineffective job behavior. For the purposes of developing culture assimilators, the ideal incident must describe (a) a common occurrence in which an American and a host national interact, (b) a situation which the American finds conflictful, puzzling, or which he is likely to misinterpret, and (c) a situation which can be interpreted in a fairly unequivocal manner, given sufficient knowledge about the culture. Finally, the incident must be

relevant to the American's task or mission requirements. Thus, a love affair may be interesting or upsetting for some Americans overseas, and it may present innumerable occasions which the American finds difficult to understand. However, under ordinary circumstances, information concerning love affairs would not be considered relevant for the job.

Critical incidents are obtained by asking Americans and host nationals with whom they come in contact to describe some specific intercultural occurrences or events that made a major difference in their attitudes or behavior toward the members of the other culture. These may be pleasant, unpleasant, or simply non-understandable occurrences. One such incident is presented below:

Incident Reported by an American Student in Thailand. The student indicated that he had had a number of appointments with Thai teachers, and that one thing that bothered him considerably was the lack of punctuality of the Thai professors. He asked some of his fellow Thai students if they were angry or disturbed over the tardiness of their teachers and they indicated that this happened rather frequently and that, yes, it disturbed them very much. The American thought about saying something to the teacher, but decided against it when the Thai students said very strongly that although they were disturbed they would never show their feelings to their professor. This was just not done.

The incident is then refined into the episode which, along with 75 to 100 others, is eventually used in the program. Names are changed and irrelevant material dropped. An example of the final episode is below:

Page X-1[3]

One day a Thai administrator of middle academic rank kept two of his assistants waiting about an hour for an appointment. The assistants, although very angry, did not show it while they waited. When the administrator walked in at last, he acted as if he were not late. He made no apology or explanation. After he was settled in his office, he called his assistants in and they all began working on the business for which the administrator had set the meeting.

Alternatives and Feedback

Having written the episodes, it is then necessary to write four possible responses which will be presented to the trainee. Each of these four alternatives obviously must be plausible. In fact, the preferred method is to ask the Americans interviewed to write out various explanations, and the most plausible are selected from this pool of alternatives. Only one is deemed correct, with the others containing various ethnocentric errors.

Finally, four "feedback" explanations must be written. These tell the trainee not only whether his answer is correct or incorrect, but they also provide him with further information about the culture. They should, in effect, give the trainee a rationale for interpreting the correctness or incorrectness of his reply and assist him in building up a frame of reference for handling similar situations. The feedback information is taken from our interviews and subjective culture data. Examples of the alternatives and feedback explanations are below:

Page X-2

If you had happened to observe the incident exactly as it is reported in this passage, which one of the following would you say describes the chief significance of the behavior of the people involved?

1. The Thai assistants were extremely skillful at concealing their true feelings.

    Go to Page X-3

2. The Thai administrator obviously was unaware of the fact that he was an hour late for the appointment.

    Go to Page X-4

3. In Thailand, subordinates are required to be polite to their superiors, no matter what happens, nor what their rank may be.

    Go to Page X-5

4. Clearly, since no one commented on it, the behavior indicated nothing of any unusual significance to any of the Thais.

    Go to Page X-6

You selected 1: The Thai assistants were extremely skillful at con-
cealing their true feelings.
This is not entirely correct.

It is quite characteristic of Thais to try to appear reserved
under any circumstances. If the assistants were extremely skillful
at concealing their true feelings, would you know that you weren't
seeing their true feelings? Also, does the reference to the chief
significance of the behavior of "the people involved" limit it to
the assistant?

You selected 2: The Thai administrator obviously was unaware of
the fact that he was an hour late for the appointment.
A very poor choice.

While the administrator acted as if he were unaware of his
tardiness after observing the hour's wait, don't you suspect that
perhaps he was acting?

You selected 3: In Thailand, subordinates are required to be
polite to their superiors, no matter what happens, nor what their
rank may be.
Very good. You are utilizing the information in the episodes to its
fullest extent. Continue. This is the correct response.

To some extent this "deference to the boss" may be observed
almost anywhere in the world, but you are far more likely to find it
carried to a higher degree in Thailand than in the United States.

There were certain clues to help you select 3: the assistants'
concealed feelings, the administrator's failure to apologize, the
fact that no one mentioned the tardiness, and the subsequent keeping
of the appointment which the administrator had set.

Did you use them at all?

What you've already learned from earlier sections of the culture
assimilator can help you. What did you learn about respect for
older and higher status persons in Thailand? And about the attitude
of students toward an American professor?

Page X-6

You selected 4: Clearly, since no one commented on it, the
behavior indicated nothing of any unusual significance to any of
the Thais.
This is completely wrong.

While the behavior reported in the passage does not seem so
significant for the Thais in this relationship as it might be to
Americans, why was nothing said about the tardiness? And why
were the assistants "very angry" although they "did not show it?"

Isn't there a more significant level of meaning for this
behavior?

One of the most important functions of feedback is to expose the learner
to some of the major themes characterizing the two cultures with which he is
working. In short, information learned from the analyses of the subjective
cultures of the two communities can be incorporated in the feedback. New
concepts can thus be taught in the context of concrete incidents.

Validation Steps

After incidents have been constructed and the alternatives and feedback
are prepared, a number of validation steps are undertaken. All the stories
with just the second page of alternatives (i.e., without the feedback) are
submitted to an appropriate sample of people from the target culture. Each
subject is asked to read the story and to choose the alternative which he feels
is most applicable as a description of what occurred from his culture's
point of view. This information is then tallied and only those stories for
which there is a high percentage of agreement are incorporated into the
final product. The program is, therefore, based on a model which holds that

given behaviors have meanings which are more probable than others. Most of the time when a certain situation or behavior occurs, the person from the other culture means a certain thing by his action.

The same subject population is also asked to rate each story on how important they feel the episode is, and how probable is its occurrence. The results from these scales help us further in deciding which incidents would represent the most frequent and important problems that might occur.

When the final group of incidents has been chosen, they are examined by a number of judges and sorted into categories according to the cultural concept with which they deal; e.g., hospitality, authority relations, saving face, etc. These groups of incidents are then sequenced according to two general principles: (1) within a group (i.e., incidents dealing with one concept or custom) the episodes begin with simple items and progress to more difficult ones. (See Foa and Chemers, 1967): (2) across groups or concepts the program generally deals with rather broad social issues at first and then moves to more specific problems. Introductory and summary statements (one or two paragraphs) are presented before and after large groups of incidents dealing with similar topics, and all of these incidents and statements are then bound together in book form.

Depending in part on the availability of critical incidents, we have generally obtained 150 to 200 incidents, of which 75 to 100 are eventually included in the Culture Assimilator. The time for preparing a 75- to 100-item program is estimated as approximately 800 manhours spread over nine months. This includes collection of items, writing the episodes and alternatives, and checking and revising the alternatives and feedback information.

Results from Laboratory Experiments

Three studies have been completed for which we have data on both group performance and interpersonal relations among members of different cultures. The first, a laboratory test, was conducted by Chemers, Fiedler, Lekhyananda, and Stolurow (1966). Twelve American cadets from the Army Reserve Officer Training Program (ROTC) were trained with a Middle Eastern or "Arab" Culture Assimilator, and twelve other cadets were trained with a control program of equal length but dealing with the geography of the Middle East. Each cadet was then assigned to a group composed of himself, as leader, and two Arab students. Each of the groups performed three tasks: 1. The group was to find the shortest possible time to route a truck convoy. The groups were

given a map as well as a chart indicating the number of hours and minutes required for each leg of the journey. 2. Each group wrote a letter to the officials of an Arab community urging them to permit their women to work in a factory to be built nearby. 3. The last task required the American to negotiate with his Arab group members on the percentage of Arabs and Moslem workers to be employed in an Arab-American mining venture.

The groups were evaluated on the performance of each of the tasks as well as on the socio-emotional climate, as determined by post-test questionnaires. For all of these variables, the differences between culture and geography trained groups were in the expected direction. Two of the group climate scores based on member ratings differed to a statistically significant degree. These findings generally supported the hypothesis that the Culture Assimilator was effective in increasing harmonious work relations. Its effect on group performance was weaker, but suggestive.

A second study used a considerably more sophisticated Culture Assimilator developed for Thailand (Foa, et al., 1967). This Thai Culture Assimilator was experimentally tested by Mitchell and Foa (1969). The study involved 32 American ROTC cadets of a Special Forces Company who were matched according to rank, and then randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. The 16 men of the experimental group received the Culture Assimilator program, and the 16 men of the control group received the geography program.

Sixteen pairs of foreign students from the Far East participated in the study. One member of each pair was from Thailand, the other from Korea or another Far Eastern country. Each pair of foreign students worked with one culture-trained and one geography-trained American. The American's job was to supervise the construction of a toy building made by his team of two foreign students and to get the building constructed in the shortest possible time and as accurately as possible. The American leader was not, however, permitted to work on the task. The experimental situation was conceptualized as simulating the problems of a Western expert working in a developing country: the expert is usually better qualified technically than his local co-workers and he is expected to train them in doing the job rather than doing it himself.

At the end of each session, an observer, the American, and the two foreign students completed an evaluation form. After the second session, all but the leader answered an additional rating form comparing the two American

leaders. Since culture- and geography-trained Americans alternated in the sessions, this last rating amounted to a comparison of the two types of training, although the group participants did not know that they were making this type comparison. Since there were two observers and two task orders possible, the design was counterbalanced to control for these possible confounds.

The results indicated that the trained leaders performed significantly better in the interpersonal area than did the control leaders as rated by the leaders, the observers, and the Thai team member. There were no significant differences for the efficiency ratings, although the results were in the predicted direction for the same three participants mentioned above. In contrast to the Thai member, in both the work efficiency and the interpersonal area, the non-Thai member of the group perceived little difference between the experimental and control leaders. These results indicated that a program for a specific culture may not be generalizable to other Far Eastern cultures. In summary then, the two laboratory studies indicated that the training program was successful in lessening interpersonal and adjustment problems occurring in heterocultural task groups.

Field Studies

The Honduras Culture Assimilator (Symonds, et al., 1967) was experimentally validated in a study by O'Brien, Fiedler and Hewett (1970). This study was conducted in the context of a people-to-people program conducted by Los Amigos de las Americas of Houston, Texas. Los Amigos yearly sends 250 to 300 teen-agers to Central America to establish and operate public health clinics which provide polio vaccinations, DPT shots, and similar preventive measures, as well as performing community development work. Three waves of teen-aged participants went to Honduras and Guatemala for three-week terms. In their host country the members of each wave were assigned to teams of two to six persons, as well as to a national and three regional headquarters teams.

Of the 265 participants in the summer of 1967, 119 received the Culture Assimilator training while the remaining 146 received the culture and area training given normally. To minimize the possibility of a "Hawthorne effect" the Culture Assimilator training was given no particular emphasis. The training given to Amigos varied somewhat; that is, some Amigos heard some

lecturers or saw some films and not others, depending upon the available time and the exigencies of scheduling. The Culture Assimilator training was, therefore, not seen as anything out of the ordinary.

The Culture Assimilator for Honduras and Guatemala was based on critical incidents reported by Amigos who had participated in the program the previous year. The program used a theoretical framework of Structural Role Theory (Oeser & Harary, 1962, 1964: Oeser & O'Brien, 1967) and emphasized incidents dealing with relations between the Amigos and host country nationals which had been collected from the previous year's group.

The evaluation of performance and adjustment took two forms: (a) Performance ratings were obtained from the director of the Amigos program and from his various headquarters staff members; (b) in addition, several adjustment measures were obtained from the Amigos themselves. These included (1) self ideal--self discrepancy scores obtained before and after the overseas experience, and (2) daily ratings of adjustment, mood and satisfaction with self, fellow team members and work overseas (these came to be known as "happy sheets"). These latter comparisons were made between first- and third-week ratings.

The results showed a general improvement in work performance of Culture Assimilator-trained as against untrained Amigos. Of particular interest was the finding that the mean adjustment of all trained Amigos also generally improved, but that the improvement as well as the work performance was higher for those who had been Amigos the previous year than for those who had gone to Central America for the first time. This completely unexpected finding suggests that the Culture Assimilator effectively assists in the integration of previously obtained cultural experiences as well as providing information for the novice abroad.[4] The data thus show that the Assimilator training contributed significantly to adjustment as well as performance in field conditions and to better interpersonal relations in laboratory studies.

Summary

The major steps in the construction of Culture Assimilators were described. They provide an apparently useful method for the instruction of members of one culture to behave effectively in social and task situations involving members of another culture. Three particular strengths of this approach are suggested: (1) the training depends on a detailed analysis of empirically

derived critical cultural information relevant for effective interaction;
(2) it provides an active, ego-involving training procedure; and (3) it has
been shown to improve the effectiveness and satisfaction of those trained with
this method when they are compared with those trained with other methods.

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[2] The concept of the Culture Assimilator training was originated by Dr. L. M. Stolurow, now at Harvard University, who was one of the co-investigators of the ARPA project from 1962 to 1967.

[3] Each set of statements here shown in a box is normally presented on a separate page.

[4] This finding is supported by informal statements of personnel of the U. S. mission in Iran where an experimental study, using an Iranian Culture Assimilator, was conducted by Chemers (1968). Unfortunately, the Iran Assimilator has not been tested under field conditions as yet.

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13 ABSTRACT

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