

# MANAGING MIGRATION: THE APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL TRANSITIONS

*Kinga Williams and Rose Aghdami*

Mensana Intercultural Psychological Consultancy, Great Britain

## Abstract

Fact: Placing a skilled executive overseas for a three-year contract can cost as much as US\$ 1 million.

Fact: A significant number of overseas sojourns fail, leading to premature repatriation.

Fact: Psychological adjustment to the new culture is the make or break of cross-cultural transitions.

Managing migration successfully is, therefore, crucial.

The paper will introduce the Mensana Model of Managing Migration.

According to the model, migration follows a five-stage psychological process, requiring management via three levels of support. The desired outcome is the development of the understanding and skills necessary to make the international sojourn a success for all involved.

**Keywords:** Migration, culture shock, psychopathology, control, heterocultural skills.

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## 1. Introduction

As practising clinical psychologists our particular interest is practical – how to help people by **applying** awareness of the psychological processes involved in changing cultures.

Through our own practice, we have developed a systematic conceptualisation to encompass the processes involved. This is the Mensana Model of Managing Migration.

It is of course impossible, within the scope of this paper, to cover all the factors which might lead to migration; wars, atrocities, persecution, poverty etc. We have deliberately chosen a population whose migration experience is by and large uncontaminated by external trauma. So, throughout this paper, we will be referring to the experiences of an international workforce for purposes of illustration. This seems particularly relevant in this day of increasing globalisation.

The structure of the rest of the paper is as follows:

- Culture shock (definition, description, process, research findings)
- The psychology of migration (models of psychological reactions)
- The Mensana Model of Managing Migration (clinical psychology applied to managing international transitions)

## 2. Culture Shock

Culture shock occurs when a person is suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar way of life. A central part of this experience is the abrupt loss of the familiar. A great deal of anxiety is caused by losing the familiar signs of social interaction – both in and out of the workplace. For example, when to shake hands (if at all); when and how to give tips; when to take statements seriously; how to treat work colleagues – superiors and subordinates; when to accept and when to refuse invitations; when to use humour and when

to avoid it. It is, therefore, easy to see that even if there is no direct language barrier, non-verbal communication can be misconstrued through lack of intercultural fluency.

Gestures, facial expressions or customs, are as much part of our culture as the language we speak. Although we may not be consciously aware of doing so, we depend on hundreds of these cues for peace of mind, for a sense of predictability, familiarity and a sense of belonging. According to Oberg, who coined the term 'culture shock' in the '60s, ""when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He is like a fish out of water."" (Oberg 1960: 177-82)

Reactions to this experience include:

- Feeling strained or frustrated because of a lack of understanding of others
- A sense of loss regarding friends, status, profession and possessions
- Rejection of and by members of the new culture
- Confusion regarding role, expectations, values and identity
- Anxiety and anger prompted by cultural differences
- Feelings of helplessness and feeling out of control.

There is a predictable **process** involved in adapting to a foreign environment (Marx 2001: 9, after Oberg 1960).

1. Firstly, there is a 'honeymoon' phase when most things are seen as positive, and the foreign experience is enjoyed.
2. The newcomer gradually experiences increasing problems, resulting in a period of culture shock, accompanied by disorientation, helplessness, irritation and perhaps depression.
3. Gradually, this period is managed and the potential crisis situation is overcome (although it is often at this point that assignments fail).
4. The phase of recovery or adaptation occurs when acceptance and understanding of difference is reached.
5. A brief mention of re-entry shock – there's more recognition these days that returning home to work can be just as much of a challenge as leaving was. This has often been expressed by a high rate of people leaving the company quite soon after an international assignment has ended. The company loses a valuable and experienced employee if this happens, so it is in their interest to address this re-entry stage appropriately when the time comes.

The most frequent symptoms of culture shock reported by international executives working all over the world are: feeling isolated and anxious, a sense of helplessness, and a decrease in efficiency and performance level at work. So, productivity is affected.

Naturally, this is not what the employee had expected or intended – he/she becomes disgruntled and frustrated.

If unaware of the cultural norms, it is impossible to build up trust and good working relationships.

There is frequent miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings are to be expected if we assume that what we see in an unfamiliar culture is all there is. There are, however, invisible aspects of a culture such as values, traditions, experiences and behaviours that define each culture. All of this is relevant to anyone finding themselves in a new culture – the accompanying spouse, the foreign student, the refugee, even the tourist.

### 3. The Psychology of Migration

Clearly an international transition has many parallels with other transitions in life e.g. the transition from child to adult, to parenthood, within working life, and geographical moves within the country of origin. Issues of loss, anticipation, becoming an outsider etc are common to all transitions, so we need not think in global terms only to see that experiencing a second culture can be at the same time good and bad.

It is beneficial because it broadens one's perspective, it promotes personal growth and it provides insight both into the new culture and into the culture of origin – now through contrast.

However, exposure to an unfamiliar culture may also be stressful and hence potentially harmful.

Three broad approaches have been developed to make sense of the experience of migration. Let us outline these briefly here.

#### 1. Migration as bereavement.

All forms of geographical movement (e.g. holidays, moving house) involve leaving stuff behind, losing loved as well as hated aspects of the previous life. This theory of migration expects the reactions to follow the process of grief and mourning i.e. shock, anger, depression and adjustment (Garza-Guerrero 1974:413).

#### 2. Migration as major life events.

Major life events are any event – positive or negative - that has a really profound effect on a person's life e.g. getting married, changing job, moving house, having kids, somebody dying. It is easy to see how migration is a combination of many such major life events (Lundstedt 1963: 7).

#### 3. Migration as loss of control. When at home we feel we are largely in control of our lives. Migration takes away a great deal of this sense of being in control leaving in its place feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Nobody likes to feel out of control, so to address this people try to smuggle control back into their lives often through the back door, overcompensating inappropriately (Rotter 1966).

### 4. The Mensana Model of Managing Migration

We have incorporated some aspects of the above theories when developing the Mensana Model, see below.

#### PROCESS:

1. MAJOR LIFE EVENT: MIGRATION
2. MODIFYING LOCUS OF CONTROL
3. MENTAL VULNERABILITY
4. MEDICALISATION
5. MANAGEMENT:
  1. PRACTICAL SUPPORT
  2. PERCEIVED SUPPORT
  3. PERSONAL:
    - A. UNDERSTANDING
      1. WHAT?
      2. HOW?
      3. WHY?
    - B. SKILLS
      1. FACTUAL
      2. BEHAVIOURAL
      3. EXPERIENTIAL

The model postulates a 5-stage psychological process of migration.

Stage 1: migration is a major life event, indeed a series of major life events. It has been found that if a person has more than a given amount of major life events within a certain period of time, he will become prone to psychological problems. It doesn't matter whether the things happening in rapid succession are positive or negative: if they are big, and if there are too many too quickly, overload leads to vulnerability. Although some or even most life events inherent in migration may be welcomed, the fact remains that unpredictability in the midst of the uprooting is rife. Unpredictability means stress, and above all, a feeling of being out of control.

Stage 2: people generally fall into one of two categories when it comes to expecting control to be either out there or within them (Rotter 1966). Those who are externally control-oriented will be fatalistic, at the mercy of circumstance, believing in luck and chance; anything but themselves as agents of change. In contrast, those with an internal locus of control will attribute most happenings to their own actions and decisions. They will feel to be the masters of their own fate, the authors of their own lives. Needless to say, migration deprives one of a lot of the control one used to have over one's life. Research has shown that people who are at either extreme of the control dimension adjust to migration less well. The optimum for migration is mild internal control orientation – to believe that you can control some things but not others (Krause and Stryker 1984:786).

Stage 3: considering the stress inherent in experiencing the major life events that make up migration, followed by the inevitable modification in migrants' locus of control it is not surprising that a degree of mental vulnerability is frequently experienced. The susceptibility of the person to, for instance, depression, anxiety, panic, stress-related illnesses etc will be exacerbated at this stage.

Stage 4: medicalisation is a particular manifestation of how psychological distress through migration can be expressed in physical terms. Medical doctors could tell you how much the language of human unhappiness tends to be somatic. People find it easier to complain about their bodies malfunctioning than to acknowledge psychological distress. This is true to some extent of the general population, but with migrants it is characteristically the case: they consult their doctors significantly more frequently than their non-migrant counterparts, despite the fact that their health is not any worse (Still 1961: 61). Many of these visits to the doctor are hypochondriacal, the migrant thinks he is physically ill, he requests medical help, but it turns out that there is nothing physically wrong with him. Loss of control resulting from migration creates the need to overcontrol, as compensation, his own health. Albeit a socially acceptable cause for concern, health anxiety often merely covers up the psychological distress caused by migration.

Stage 5: management of migration. It is important to be mindful of an international workforce requiring support on various levels. These can be termed Practical, Perceived and Personal levels of support.

1. Practical support would include e.g. information about the new country, if necessary language courses, a befriending scheme, psychological services etc.
2. Practical support in itself is not sufficient unless it is indeed perceived as being provided.
3. Personal needs of international migrants.

This personal level of support encompasses two aspects that need to be balanced if the assignment is going to be successful for all parties involved.

**A** First of all, it is of the utmost importance that a clear understanding of the processes involved in migration is cultivated. This might take the form of psychological briefing either in groups or individually. Questions in the potential migrant's mind will often be three-fold:

- 1: What should I/we expect from the new assignment?
- 2: How can I/we cope with the changes?
- 3: Why should it be difficult?

It is important to note that the need for continued mindfulness, mentalising and understanding, is an ongoing process throughout the sojourn. Research has shown that an initial set of requirements can change totally – say, 6 months on, upon which understanding the new set becomes urgent (Kealey 1989: 419). Conveying this as expected and a normal involvement inherent in the experience is helpful. Difficulties can be normalised through offering opportunities for discussion, workshops on integration, and support groups. In some cases, professional psychological input may be indicated.

**B** In order to regain a sense of control over the migration situation, it is essential to gain some mastery of the new culture. Culture-learning (Bochner 1981), therefore, is key. This will properly utilise the available control capacity, thereby removing the need to use it inappropriately.

Culture-learning is a form of skills learning, relevant to the What? How? and Why? aspects of the *understanding* side of the scales on the diagram. It is crucial to incorporate this into managing migration in order to ensure balance.

*What to expect* requires 1: factual information.

*How to cope* needs 2: behaviour instruction (including verbal and non-verbal communicative skills training), and the

Why must be explored 3: experientially, e.g. exploring and comparing the values held by oneself and those of the host country.

## 5. Conclusions

As the result of successfully providing this personal level of support, the international workforce will be kept reasonably happy: psychological health will prevail; the migrant will be more open towards their new environment. They will adjust to it better and feel more comfortable in it. In short, they will be on the way to develop what is known as a heterocultural personality (Taft 1981: 94), a healthy balance between the old and the new. If the international assignment is well managed, then it can be immensely rewarding.

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## About the authors:

Dr Kinga Williams MA, BSc, PhD, DipClinPsych, UKCPreg,

Clinical Psychologist, Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist, Lecturer in Abnormal Psychology, with a special interest in the psychopathology of immigration and culture shock in adults and the elderly.

Rose Aghdami CPsychol, BSocSc, MSc, DipCoPsych,

Counselling Psychologist and Trainer in private practice, with a special interest in issues raised by cross-cultural transitions, cultural identity, marginality and the concept of 'home'.

Both are co-founders of Mensana Y International (Est. 1999), a clinical practice and intercultural consultancy, specialising in the applied psychology of international transitions.

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