

Stress and Exposure to an Alien Culture among Foreign Workers in Rwanda: Cross-Cultural Perspective.

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Abstract

Movement of people across cultural boundaries is not a new thing. It is interesting to note that contact between people who belong to different ethnic groups or backgrounds of different nations take place for specific reasons. These include: to teach, learn, do business, settle, for missionary work, for recreation or lack of satisfying career opportunity at home. These things are not unique in Rwandan context where there are many foreigners of different categories who have come to live or work for different reasons. This paper examines some of the socio-psychological problems that foreigners in Rwanda are exposed to that lead to stress. Foreigners' experiences and cultural backgrounds make them distinguished from their hosts. The more the similarity between the culture of the receiving population and the newcomers' culture, the less the stress experienced by the latter group.

Introduction

Different researchers from different disciplines have defined the term stress in different ways. It appears easy to group a few words to define the term stress. The word stress has been borrowed from engineering psychologists. It was used for instrument, which bored the ground. The instrument was known as "stressor" and the ground as "under stressor." This means that the ground was under stress. Stress is a relatively new term in the vocabulary of psychologists. Generally, stress manifests itself in physical form. Disturbance in digestive process, blood circulation and so on. It is a response-based reaction of the body because it is associated with adaptation syndrome. Here stress is used as an independent variable and refers to psychological response of the organism. We can therefore point out that stress occurs when there is substantial imbalance between environmental demand and response capability and also when there is perceived response capability. One is threatened in stressful situation by the anticipation that he/she would not be able to handle perceived demands adequately.

Social difficulties can come about when individuals brought up in different societies or cultural backgrounds come in contact with each other. For example, foreigners who come to Rwanda are from different parts of the world such as Europe, East Africa, North Africa and Central Africa whose cultures, ideologies, norms and values of life differ widely from those of Rwanda. These differences can cause intra-psychic conflicts among the aliens that may result into stress. However, it cannot be generalised that all the above-mentioned categories of foreigners will experience the same intensity of stress in Rwanda. This observation is true because foreigners from Central Africa are expected to experience less psychological stress than the rest of foreigners because people who hail from those countries tend to share more or less the same culture with Rwanda. Moreover, the languages spoken in these countries have dialects that resemble *Kinyaranda* language, which is widely spoken in Rwanda. This facilitates their understanding of Rwandan culture as compared to their counterparts from other countries.

Cross-cultural Studies on Stress

A number of studies have been conducted to identify situations and circumstances that generate stress as well as provoking anxiety for the people who are exposed to an alien culture. Two psychologists, Huges and Reling (1970) interviewed 228 students in eight potentially anxious aspects of college life. The results showed that physical danger, pain and

squeamishness, anxiety from classroom participation and speech, social, academic failure and dating were sources of uncomfortability to students. By and large, social psychology considers stress to emanate from behaviour setting. Thus, Bryant and Tower (1974) carried out a study on 223 students in the US on thirty specified situations. Students experienced stress in situations demanding complex levels of interaction, mainly with members of opposite sex and where close bonds had been established. It was found out that seeking out to relate to strangers especially members of opposite sex was the primary source of social difficulty.

Moreover, Magwaza and Bhana (1991) carried out research on black South Africans to study psychological effects of being forced to leave their native residence to novel places designed by white government. They administered a scale to evaluate stress, locus of control and psychological status to 50 involuntary farm immigrants, 50 voluntary farm immigrants and 50 non-immigrants. The overall results revealed that the immigrants perceived more stress and were more psychologically distressed than non-immigrants. Nonetheless Moghaddam, Ditto and Taylor (1990) identified the patterns of attitudes and attributions associated with relatively high and low distress among 104 immigrant women (whose age range was 19-64 years) from India living in Montreal. Aspects that were examined included social interactions, attributions, life satisfaction, heritage culture maintenance, self-perceptions, perceived discrimination and psychological stress. The results revealed that high distressed subjects were less satisfied with their roles in the home, in the job, market place, were more in favour of modern sex roles, wanted less pass on traditional sex roles to their children.

However, Penalosa (1986) carried out a study on Central American immigrants to the USA. The results showed that immigrants had distress in relation to health, employment, welfare, housing, interethnic relations, among others. The subjects manifested depression, anxiety and confusion. It was found that children suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from having suppressed so much emotion in the struggle to survive. Nevertheless, Furnham (1984 b) carried out rather more sophisticated study. He reported that not all tourists enjoy their sojourn. Majority of the subjects were found to experience bewilderment, rage, disgust, boredom, both mental and physical illness side by side with delight and recreation of trip. Drunkenness, brawls and other kinds of socially unacceptable behaviour occurred more often on holidays. Moreover, there were also negative psychological reactions of tourists that are consequences of culture shock. These include unfulfilled promises (hotel bookings, cost of items) transportation difficulties, theft of money, theft of belongings or being taken advantage of as well as being cheated. There is no doubt that foreign workers in Rwanda experience these difficulties in isolated cases as well.

What does stress do to people?

Stress is number one killer when it is not controlled or managed well by its victims. If it is prolonged or unmanaged, it results in psychological and physical discomfort or psychosomatic disorders. The right thing to do is to identify the source and then deal with it forthright instead of suspending it. The following are specific ways in which stress can affect people in general:

- Emotions: normally in distressful situations, we feel: stressed, frustrated, anxious, depressed, tension and hopelessness. Some people develop guilt conscience about these different types of emotions. Nonetheless, these emotions are our bodies warning symptoms that some pressure is on us that require us to cope so the emotions can be reduced.
- Perceptions and beliefs: The ways we think, reason, and evaluate the stressful situation can affect our level of negative stress and our ability to think. Some people when confronted by difficult situations, they ask questions such as; will I manage? Will I cope? What will happen if I fail? Will I endure it?

- Manifested behavioural patterns: some people act aggressively while others are composed and take the threatening situation with calm. The former category of people may either attack the concerned source of stress physically or verbally. The latter category may withdraw from the situation or isolate themselves from the source of the stress.
- Body reactions: The inside body metabolisms may start to help those who are stressed. This is commonly referred to as 'general-adaptation syndrome' because the person attempts to get used to the challenging situation. Some of bodily changes that take place include; high rate of heart beats, high blood pressure, rate of breathing goes up, adrenal gland secretes excess adrenaline as if the body is to do something urgently. All these reactions put pressure on us resulting into stress.

Sources of stress

Sources of stress in Rwanda

The following are the causes of stress in Rwandan context:

- First, language barrier: this is mainly a problem to Angolophone speaking foreigners who do not understand French language and Kinyarwanda, which is the local language. Most foreigners do not have adequate preparation in *Kinyarwanda* language. Some foreigners do not have interest in the local language because of its dialect complexity. Perhaps people from African countries, particularly the Bantus speakers from sub-Saharan Africa have more opportunity to know the local language hence the Rwandan people and their culture. In essence, foreigners from neighbouring countries (such as Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi) have advantage of picking Kinyarwanda as compared to expatriates from Europe or America. This is because of Kinyarwanda language is more or less similar to languages spoken in these countries. Subsequently, they are better equipped to understand Rwandan society which may mean that they encounter less stress as compared to none Africans.

Secondly, preconceptions and structural stereotypes tendencies that the host and aliens in Rwanda hold towards each other is the course of stress. The in-group (autostereotype) and out-group (heterostereotype) members of the two societies can comprehensively easily be observed. Foreigners in Rwanda are perceived to be more emotionally controlled and more open to the members of the host population, but not vice versa. In fact the hosts are less extroverted than their guests. The guests feel that their hosts misperceive them.

Thirdly, the typical anxiety that shrouds cross-cultural communications when one deals with unfamiliar experiences: foreign missions that are unsuccessful in Rwanda that include serving as a community worker, working in non governmental organisations or a refugee camp and teaching in local institutions are mainly due to personal difficulties such as inability to adapt or deal with interpersonal relations in unfamiliar circumstances. This is why most sojourners find themselves to be socially inadequate. Consequently they succumb to depression or anxiety that eventually leads to stress and perhaps psychosomatic ailments. In addition, Odera (2003) observed that visiting lecturers, diplomatic corps, volunteer workers, foreign military personnel and foreign business people interact more frequently with fellow nationals due to warmth, intimacy and dependency towards their co-national. Interpersonal relationships with the host country seldom go beyond superficial pleasantries. Supposed there was a strong interpersonal relation between foreigners and Rwandans then the level of stress may be lowered considerably.

Stress and exposure of foreigners in Rwanda

No matter what happens, the outcome of any cross-cultural contact is not determined by one factor, neither do the factors that are involved affect independently. This is so because there is interplay of factors involved in contact situations. For instance, variables such as sojourner's contact, social network, phases of contact, attitudes towards the hosts and attitudes towards the guests. By and large, the duration of stay can be determined by the outcome of contact situations between the hosts and the guests. The longer the guest stays in a foreign land the more the host population observe the latter in a way commonly referred by social psychologists as xenophobic. The xenophobic condition creates feeling among the hosts that those who have come to Rwanda are exploiting the available resources and taking up the jobs that they could otherwise get. This may be true in the context of Rwanda whose weak economy is characterised by economic fluctuations and inflation leading to unemployment, dislocation and poverty for millions of Rwandans. Hence xenophobic feelings from the hosts with their unrealistic and unreasonable feelings of inferiority, hatred and resentment towards the guests. Despite the effort put by foreigners in performing their duties, little if not none is appreciated by the members of the hosting society, this creates stress in the former.

Most foreigners who come to Rwanda particularly as expatriates such as lecturers, teachers, military personnel, volunteer workers, diplomatic corps, business people tourists among others, may experience stress in one way or the other. They may manifest their dissatisfaction and social inadequacy in the way of greeting; lack of extension of invitation to visit host population at/in their/houses/home, spiting habit, food habits, superficial interaction between the members of receiving society and the guests, lack of public toilets in major towns and lack of punctuality in appointments.

These behavioural indicators bring about not only stress to the foreigners who come to Rwanda but also culture shock. For example, people who come from East African countries (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) generally greet in a simple way by saying hallo or by handshake. This is not the case in Rwandan context whereby exaggerated hugging commonly known as *guhoberana* in the local dialect is a manner of greeting between members of the same sex and/or different sexes that seem to be enshrined in Rwandan culture. This form of greeting embarrasses majority of foreigners, they become uneasy and shy, subsequently, and this causes acute stress in them particularly when the greeting is between members of the opposite sex. This is because in East African countries such intimate greeting is mainly exchanged between close family members or people who are very intimate. Failure to carry out *guhoberana* in the right way makes the locals to pass disparaging remarks that isolate out one to be a foreigner. This creates distress due to discrimination attached to such isolation especially in social gathering (Odera, 2003). By and large, there are numerous sources of stress in Rwanda; these are as follows:

- Firstly, feeling of loneliness: many foreigners feel lonely despite the fact that they interact with compatriots or other foreigners from different countries. Still loneliness is felt because the interaction with the host population is sort of artificial. The host population are hesitant to extend invitations to their guest counterparts. This creates loneliness in them.
- Secondly, pressure of adjustment to alien culture: the fact that most foreigners who come to Rwanda are grown ups that grew up in different cultures and so have different social values, it becomes difficult for one to fully acculturate himself/herself in Rwandan context. Kinyarwanda and French are the widely spoken languages. The former is the national language and the latter is the official language. Expatriates who hail from East African and

other Anglophone countries find it difficult to follow events in general, for example, following speech during national celebrations or public rallies. This further makes foreigners particularly from the countries mentioned above to be vulnerable to stress and lack of interaction.

- Thirdly, overwhelming workload: Aliens who came to work in Rwanda in various fields tend to have a lot of work that must be accomplished. Despite of the effort they put in work, members of the receiving country rarely appreciate or do not appreciate at all, instead the foreigners who are hard working are perceived as exploitative and a source of impoverishing the host country. This is contrary to the belief and dedication of the aliens who work in Rwanda. Moreover, the overwhelming workload in the fields of teaching, medicine and community service lead to burn out syndrome among the expatriates. This has led some foreigners to succumb or give up their foreign assignments and to return home prematurely.
- Fourth, social climate: Social relations can help people to cope with and reduce stress. Such support cannot only come from the natives but also fellow sojourners with other relations between people who hail from different countries. In Rwanda, social network of compatriots is stronger as compared to relations between people from different countries or between foreigners and their host counterparts. However, it must mention here that social support will not eliminate stress but will definitely provide resources to manage it. Such social climate can be referred to as peer support.
- Fifth, pressure on demands on one's time: many expatriates in teaching profession do not find enough time to do personal things. Most of the time is spent in matters related to their work. School teachers and lecturers at higher institutions of learning hardly have time to relax because of the nature of the workload at their disposal. Their medical counterparts get work as a source of conflict. Time on call to assist the sick and their work that take away from them time for interaction with family members are singled out as major conflict that affect family fabrics. This results into anxiety and depression. This augments is consistent with the view of Parker and DeCotiis (1983) who pointed out those occupations that are relatively more prone to stress include managers, school teachers and health professionals. The above argument is further supported by the findings of Lu, Tseng and Cooper (1999) who also revealed that stress level of American managers in Taiwan was too high enough to affect their mental health, physical health and their managerial skills.
- Finally, other sources of stress in Rwandan context include: lack or shortage of medical facilities, professionally trained doctors and paramedics, frightening thoughts related to family at home country or security in the host country, frequent lack of electricity supply, lack of adequate recreational facilities, sense of loss and separation from one's family that is manifested in depression, anxiety and confusion, perception and expectation of public and perception of self-self-esteem or personal competence for coping with situations.

How do foreigners externally react to stress in Rwanda?

This is a very fundamental question that must be addressed if foreigners who come to Rwanda must be helped so that they find living in Rwanda fruitful. The following are some of the reactions of foreigners who work in Rwanda.

Firstly, irritability. It is expected that those who go abroad should hold values, culture and lifestyles of the host population but still one may find that some of the behavioural patterns of the hosts are exceedingly irritating and cause frustration and unnecessary stress. In Rwandan context, for instance, the spiting habit without inhibition among the host population is a source of nuisance to most of aliens who live among them. The guests find the habit annoying and unacceptable. The locals particularly the common man referred to as *baturage* in the local

language do not hesitate to spit on the road, pedestrians' paths, around public areas such as market places, restaurants or shops. This habit is extended to sauna parlours. In addition, the locals are not fond of using handkerchiefs for cleaning their noses; instead they blow their noses using bear hands or forcefully remove the unwanted stuff by spitting it the longest distance possible. These are shocking habits to the aliens who live and work in Rwanda.

Secondly, given the fact that most foreigners who come to Rwanda have inadequate knowledge about an unfamiliar culture they consequently develop more empathy, sympathy and insufficient intercultural relations. This leads to a state of hopelessness that results into restlessness. This may cause amount of difficulty or a sudden change that requires adaptation that may be instrumental in understanding the psychological dimension to reactions to socio-geographic movement.

Thirdly, depression and illness: depression does not make foreigners in Rwanda more vulnerable to become ill, but it can cause death especially when one suffers from severe conditions of high blood pressure or cardiovascular disorders. Depression can lower one's performance; this can pose problems to aliens' missions in Rwanda because many people are willing to return to their countries of origin after completion of their contracts. Some even leave Rwanda before their contracts end because of problems related to stress. Contrary to the above view, not all sojourners who come to Rwanda start off by elation or optimism. Some are sad, depressed and anxious immediately they reach the host country. Some of the aliens never become depressed or anxious, they enjoy all the experiences and adjust easily to the receiving country.

Fourthly, manifestation of posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome (PTSD) from having suppressed so much emotion in struggle to survive: In the view of Gross (2001 p. 649) who cited Thompson (1997) "PTSD is a state of anxiety disorder that occurs in response to an extreme psychological or physical trauma outside range of normal human experience." The cause of PTSD is mainly environmental. PTSD is known as *ihahamuka*, which can be directly translated in the local language as "being breathless and manifestation of fear." PTSD is a psychological problem experienced by children, or people who are easily frightened or experience trauma related nightmares. The atrocities of 1994 left many Rwandans either killed or maimed or lost their beloved ones or friends. Almost every Rwandan experienced or still experiences stressful moments concerning the events of 1994. Both children and adults were affected. The effects of war and genocide on the psyche of survivors are still fresh and persist given the fact that there is national anniversary of the events annually. From the observation made, children, adolescents and adults who experienced the horrors of massacres of their close relatives, friends and acquaintances suffer from PTSD.

Since foreigners work among Rwandans, it is not practically possible to fail to come across those who were affected by the events of 1994. Even then volunteer workers, community workers, school teachers, lecturers, missionaries on a daily basis often come across the victims. Working with or among such people is equally traumatising when they narrate the ordeal of the events during war and genocide. Some indigenous revealed that it is not easy to trust anyone because most of people who fully participated in genocide massacres were one's neighbours, schoolmates, school teachers, church leaders and friends. This is quite stressful and traumatic to sojourners in Rwanda. Some of the PTSD symptoms depicted by 1994 genocide victims that have adverse effects on aliens are nightmares, reliving trauma, flashbacks or memories of the past, loss of memory, lack of concentration on any activity, withdrawal tendencies, insomnia and phobia.

Fifthly, the anxiety about returning home: the anxiety that arise from working abroad may not be realised easily due to unforeseen circumstances. Foreign workers are likely to become disgruntled. The uncertainty about what the future may hold or the lack of any assured position when they return home may severely impede those who worked in Rwanda from

making the best use of the advantages got from the opportunity of working abroad, thus depriving both foreigners who worked in Rwanda and countries of origin of the benefits of what is generally a long international exposure. These situations can create anxiety, psychological instability or mental disorder or readjustment problems. Other reactions to stress and exposure of sojourners in Rwanda include: restlessness, getting easily annoyed due to adamant attitudes of the indigenous, feeling of inability to undertake tasks, effects on family relationships and intolerant conditions at place work and weak interpersonal relationships which in fact is superficial at work place. This may be due to xenophobic feeling indigenous have towards their guest counterparts.

Management of stress in Rwanda

Firstly, one of the best things to do when one suffers from stress in his/her an alien society due to pressure of work, social inadequacy and failure to cope with the new values of the receiving society is to take a complete break from daily routine. The holiday can last for between two and four weeks at one time. The main purpose of a holiday is to break monotony of exposure to a certain situation and to make one relaxed so that he/she overcomes stresses and strains of life.

Secondly, taking part in some exercise can assist one from stressful situations. Those who suffer from insomnia, nightmare or restlessness due to trauma or PTSD may have excessive production of adrenalin in their systems. This may make them feel fatigued and completely worn out. Therefore, little but regular exercise can be a remedial in addition to a good night sleep that can lead to breaking of the vicious circle of distress and stress. One can take part in exercise that he/she enjoys, such as football, netball, jogging, swimming, climbing or walking. These activities have positive effects to the body because they are adrenalin-discharging activities. So it is advisable for one to take part in physical exercise in order to reduce the level of stress.

Thirdly, talking and sharing one's troubles with concerned persons such as friends, compatriots, colleagues, doctors and counsellors or family members at home. A trouble shared is a trouble halfway solved. Being gloomy, unkind, cruel, disliking the values of the receiving society, hatred towards for the host population and any other negative attitudes formed towards the receiving society make the part of brain called hypothalamus to send impulses to the pituitary gland that produces hormones that triggers adrenal glands slightly above the kidneys. It is the kidneys that produce special hormones that can cause high blood pressure and a rise in heartbeat. Continuous negative thoughts in an alien society can cause over production of these hormones, which can be dangerous to sojourners health because it can lead to psychosomatic disorders. Other effects are that one feels discouraged, exhausted, anxious, depressed, discomfort in the stomach and/or loss of appetite.

Fourthly, an application of social skills in an alien society is helpful to foreign workers in Rwanda. All the categories of foreign workers mentioned throughout this paper that come to Rwanda for different assignments are assumed to be highly skilled in values of their own countries of origin. But still, from the observation made, they encounter stress due to their social inadequacy in the host country that leads to disappointments, frustration, distress and depression. The failure on the part of the foreign workers can be ameliorated if not reduced when they acquire social skills that would enhance their effective social encounters. Such skills include expression of acceptable attitudes towards the hosts, understanding of the body language and the gaze patterns of the host population they interact with, manner of greetings, how to accept or refuse offers and being assertive. All these skills can assist expatriates in Rwanda a great deal in dealing with stressful situations.

Finally, other ways of managing distressful situation in Rwanda that expatriates can employ include the following: being tolerant and accommodative to behavioural patterns of the

receiving country, in order to reduce the feeling of loneliness while in a foreign land it is advisable for one to maintain regular contacts with family members and friends at home in order to maintain in-group membership with home people. The home network acts as support and stress absorber during difficult moments, it is important to attempt to learn the local language of the host population because it would help expatriates to understand the locals better and assists in their participation in community and social activities, lastly, foreigners in Rwanda who face social difficulties should look for professional assistance from experts such as guidance and counselling personnel, psychiatrist and psychologists.

Conclusion

Stress experienced by foreigners in an alien society is basically due to environmental demands. Any adjustive demand that requires coping behavioural patterns on part of foreigners in Rwanda is likely to cause stress, depression, anxiety and frustrations. Stress manifests itself in emotional, psychological and physical forms. From the observation made on expatriates who have assignments in Rwanda, we can conclude that apprehension of physical danger, pain, anxiety, depression, social inadequacy, failure in meeting deadlines, feeling of hopelessness, tension and loneliness are the sources of discomfort that lead to stress. This makes many aliens such as lecturers, teachers, social workers, business people, diplomatic corps and volunteer workers who work in Rwanda to encounter unpleasant and difficult demands on their energy, skills, experience, time and exposure. The stress that follows movement to a new environment affects coping mechanisms that then become maladaptive. However, some of the ways of managing cross-cultural stress include: having holiday, sharing one's troubles with others, taking parting exercise, maintaining contact with home people, being accommodative and by seeking assistance from professionals.

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