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The Development of Cultural Self-Awareness: Design of a Program of Instruction

by

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14

Prefatory Note

This paper was presented at the NATO meeting by Dr. William A. McClelland, Associate Director of the Human Resources Research Office. The research reported in the paper was performed under Work Unit COPE, A Program of Instruction for the Development of Cultural Self-Awareness, at HumRRO Division No. 7 (Language and Area Training), Alexandria, Virginia.

Dr. Kraemer, author of the paper, is Work Unit Leader of COPE. An objective in the research is to increase the potential effectiveness of U.S. personnel overseas by a program of audio-visual instruction reflecting the influence of cultural factors in personal interactions.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL SELF-AWARENESS: DESIGN OF A PROGRAM OF INSTRUCTION

Alfred J. Kraemer

The research described, currently in progress, is an effort to develop and evaluate a training process designed to enhance the ability of persons from the United States to communicate with persons of other cultural backgrounds. It is intended particularly for use with military officers, Foreign Service and Information Service Officers, Peace Corps Volunteers, members of the Agency for International Development, and businessmen.

The technique employed for the development of this process could probably be used for developing a similar process for training persons of other nationalities. Before describing our approach, I shall briefly outline some of the ideas on which it is based.

When two persons communicate with each other, the behavior of each reflects assumptions about the cognitions of the other. These assumptions may be made knowingly or, more frequently, without awareness that they are implied by one's behavior. To the extent that these assumptions are false, less communication occurs. This is not to say that the validity of these assumptions is the only factor in achieving communication—there are other obstacles. But false assumptions about the other person's cognitions seem to be one of the most pervasive barriers to communication.

Since cognitions are largely based on experience, the validity of these assumptions is likely to correlate highly with the degree of similarity of the past experience of the two persons. To the extent that their cultural backgrounds differ, they can be expected to make more false assumptions about each other's cognitions than they would in comparable situations with their own countrymen.

This is generally recognized in so-called "area training" programs designed to prepare Americans for assignments overseas. However, the traditional approach to such training has been an ethnocentric one: The American is going to work in a foreign culture, and, therefore, to be effective, he must learn as much about that culture as time permits. It is hoped that such learning will somehow give him some insight into the cognitions of the foreigner and he will then make fewer false assumptions about the foreigners. I want to make several observations about this approach.

It is obvious that the interaction between two persons of differing cultural backgrounds involves *two* foreigners, not one, and that anyone who wishes to prepare himself for this process would do well to learn about the cognitions of both persons. In addition, with the limited time and teaching talent usually available for area training it is left

largely to the trainee himself to translate this newly gained superficial knowledge of the other culture into an understanding of how that culture affects specific cognitions and their various behavioral manifestations. This is too much to expect of the trainee, and it should not be surprising that most of them cannot effectively make this translation. To be sure, area training of two or three weeks' duration can make a person aware of some of the more obvious ways in which host-country nationals are influenced by their culture. Thus, the trainee generally learns enough about the visible "habits and customs" of the other culture to avoid committing some horrible faux pas, but he remains largely ignorant of many subtle ways in which the cognitions of host-country nationals are related to cultural factors. This shortcoming might not have serious consequences for the rare person who is aware of his own ignorance. But for others, this lack of understanding can be disastrous—it can lead them to assume that except for cognitions related to cultural habits and customs, their own cognitions are shared by the other person. This, in turn, can lead to a variety of undesirable consequences: offensive behavior, misunderstandings, false inferences about the motives of the other person, frustration, and disappointment.

The foregoing observations suggest that training for international assignments might be improved by the inclusion of a process designed to develop the trainee's "cultural self-awareness," that is, his awareness of the cultural nature of *his own* cognitions, particularly of the various subtle ways in which *his own* cultural background will influence him in his interaction with host-country nationals. This means that the trainee would become aware that many of his cognitions, previously thought "natural" or "normal," and therefore universal, may not be shared by members of another culture.

This training, if its effects carry over into the field, should contribute in many ways to the individual's ability to communicate. It should make him aware of how little he knows about the cognitions of host-country nationals and cause him to make fewer false assumptions about these cognitions; it should lead him to suspend judgment of host-country nationals and their culture when confronted by behavior that he cannot interpret; it should help him develop a preference for seeking cultural explanations of difficulties in communicating with host-country nationals rather than explanations in terms of individual shortcomings on their part; and it should motivate him to keep on learning more about their cognitions during his entire stay in the host country. His awareness of the cultural nature of his own cognitions should enable him to recognize other cultural alternatives more readily.

There is, of course, nothing new in the general idea that knowledge of one's own culture should make it easier to interact with members of another culture (1, 2); some area training programs do include lectures about American culture. However, learning the abstractions and generalities of one's culture, and recognizing their specific manifestations in one's own cognitions, are not the same thing. As Riesman has so aptly noted from his observations of Peace Corps Volunteers,

"their real culture shock came at the discovery of how 'American' they were" in spite of their professed rejection of many American values (3, p. 39).

One of the basic assumptions of the work to be described is that cultural self-awareness cannot be developed in most trainees by having them read or listen to anthropological and sociological descriptions of the American culture and its values. What is required, I feel, is a convincing demonstration of the cultural relativity of the trainee's own specific cognitions. The problem seems analogous to the development of awareness of one's psychological individuality. Reading or listening to psychological descriptions of one's personality characteristics would be unlikely to accomplish this for most persons.

These, then, are some of the ideas underlying the decision to design a process for developing cultural self-awareness in Americans undergoing preparation for overseas assignments.

I shall now describe the various steps involved in the development of this process. Basically, these steps are (a) the design of simulated intercultural encounters; (b) the video-recording of the spontaneous behavior of subjects in these encounters; (c) the selection, organization, and editing of excerpts from recorded material to develop sequences showing conceptually related behavior; and (d) the writing of instructions, comments, questions, answers, and explanations to accompany the sequences of excerpts, for involving audiences in the training process.

The Simulated Intercultural Encounters

These encounters are spontaneous interactions, in a laboratory setting, between individual American subjects, who are role-playing, and an actor who is behaving according to directions learned during special training. The subjects are told that they will participate in a research study in intercultural communication; that they will be role-playing with a visiting foreigner, described to them simply as "non-Western," who will also be role-playing; that both are expected to act as they would if they found themselves in the situation described to them; and that the foreigner is familiar with the situation to be played, and with his role, from his experience in his country. No actual country is named; it is explained that the research purpose does not require this.

The objectives of these interactions are: to obtain spontaneous subject behavior that reflects or implies cognitions considered to be common among adult middle-class American males; to obtain actor behavior, appearing to be spontaneous, that reflects or implies contrasting cognitions; and to obtain these behaviors in the context of plausible on-the-job encounters between Americans and host-country nationals in a traditional society.

The subjects are selected from groups of people who are similar to those for whom the training process is intended. It is important that they be individuals with whom most of the trainees will identify,

that is, whose behavior in the encounter will be perceived by them as behavior they themselves might well display under similar circumstances. This means that subject characteristics that are irrelevant to the objective of the interaction are also important. For example, if a subject is rejected by trainees because of his looks, mannerisms, or speech peculiarities, it is likely that specific instances of his behavior would also be rejected, even though the actions might be quite representative of what most trainees themselves would have done.

The actor is playing his role according to directions intended to make him portray a national character that contrasts sharply with the American national character. These directions were derived from an artificial set of cultural premises and values created by contrasting the premises and values of American culture as described by Kluckhohn (4), DuBois (5), Williams (6), Gillin (7), and others. They are a modified version of directions initially developed by Stewart, Danielian, and Foster (8).

The actor's task is a difficult one. He has to help elicit expressions of the subject's cognitions, and to provide a contrast against which the cultural nature of these cognitions will become more readily apparent to the eventual trainee audience. But if the contrast is too sharp, some subjects come to believe that their task is impossible and, as a result, become relatively passive. Others may come to consider the actor's behavior as implausible, which results in a deterioration of their role-playing. The actor must therefore not be frozen into a behavior pattern that restricts the behavior of the subject to a point where the desired American characteristics are not manifested, or where that behavior loses its naturalness. Also, he must refrain from explaining his cognitions, that is, describing the values and premises of his culture. He must simply act in a manner from which the contrasting set of cultural premises and values could be inferred by a trained observer. In addition, he has to be able to play different roles, as required by the adaptations of the situations to the various types of trainees.

The situations that form the basis of the role-playing are descriptions of quite plausible circumstances that normally occur, or could occur, in the course of an overseas assignment of the subject and of the eventual trainee. However, the descriptions do not give any directions as to how to act in the given situation, or any clues as to what is expected of him. His American-ness is to be projected spontaneously rather than to be contrived. One of the gratifying aspects of this work has been the relative regularity with which certain cognitions are manifested by various subjects. (Needless to say, there are some atypical subjects.)

These encounters can be regarded as a form of cultural projective test. The subjects are asked to imagine themselves in situations that are actually ambiguous, but immediately acquire for them certain meanings, and propel them to certain actions, that bring out their American-ness. As Riesman has pointed out, "one could make an excellent study of American character types by a more systematic effort

to examine this variety of cross-cultural encounters [of Peace Corps Volunteers in rural settings in Asia], each an unstandardized Rorschach to bring out the quintessentially American" (9, xvii). I believe that the simulated encounters I have described would make it unnecessary to go into the field to make such a study.

Video Recording

The interactions take place in a room devoid of the usual technical paraphernalia found in a TV studio. There are no stage lights, microphones are hidden, and cameras, located in an adjacent room, shoot through openings in the wall. Subjects are informed that the interactions will be video-taped, but it is felt that if all the gadgetry were visible, less natural behavior would result.

Most subjects raise questions, prior to the playing of a situation, about the lack of specificity in their instructions with respect to what they are to do. These questions are invariably answered by pointing out that no one would answer such questions in the field where they would be on their own. Once engaged in the role-playing, most subjects seem to be able to muster enough imagination to proceed with the action. Some participants, in fact, become so motivated to achieve some minimum practical result during the interaction that the actor finds it difficult, when given a signal, to terminate the encounter in a plausible fashion prior to such achievement. The duration of the encounters has ranged from 10 to 60 minutes.

So far, 15 Army Engineer Officers, playing the role of advisors, and 14 university students, playing the role of Peace Corps Volunteers, have served as subjects. The number of situations played by a subject depends on the researcher's impressionistic evaluation of his performance during the first situation. The criteria used for making this evaluation are: Is the subject honestly role-playing or is he "putting on an act"? Is an audience of trainees likely to be able to identify with him? Does his behavior reflect or imply a sufficient number of the kinds of cognitions of which trainees are to be made aware? About half of the subjects have served for two or three situations.

It is planned to explore the usefulness of video recordings of the subject's reactions during a self-confrontation playback, in terms of their value in training the eventual audiences. The following procedure is used for making such recordings. After the playing of an encounter, the subject and a researcher watch a playback of the recording. The playback is stopped whenever the subject has a spontaneous reaction and whenever the researcher asks him a question. The questions are intended to encourage the subject to explain his behavior without suggesting particular explanations to him. The objective is to get the subject to develop some cultural self-awareness by discovering, *on his own*, the cultural nature of some of the cognitions he had during that encounter, and of the resulting unwarranted assumptions he made about the cognitions of the actor. A recording is made of the subject's spontaneous comments and of the questions and

answers. This recording and the recording of the encounter are combined into a single composite that shows the original interaction and the gradual development of the subject's awareness during the self-confrontation.

Subjects differ widely in their reactions to this procedure. Also, the kind of set provided by the researcher's instructions prior to the playback, and the degree to which he helps the participant with his questions, seem to be important variables in determining reactions. So far, this procedure has been tried with 15 of the subjects. A few of them seemed to develop considerable awareness, considering the limited experience provided by one encounter. Others had little to say about themselves, focusing instead on the behavior of the actor, and on what they considered to be a lack of necessary specificity in the role-playing instructions.

With some subjects great care has to be taken to assure that they are not hurt by what they see in themselves. For the role-playing naturally shows not only the cultural aspects of the subject's personality, but highly individual aspects as well. Although the latter are of no particular interest for the development of the training process, they may be of great concern to the participant himself. In this connection, it should be noted that the eventual training process is not intended to modify the personality of the trainee. It is assumed that persons who are emotionally unsuited for work in another culture either will not be selected for such assignments, or will have undergone appropriate therapeutic experiences prior to participating in this process.

Development of Sequences of Excerpts

No recordings have as yet been shown to trainee audiences. But on many occasions recordings have been shown to persons interested in the research, such as training administrators, instructors in area training programs, or fellow psychologists. I am always amazed by the fact that most of these persons recognize only the most obvious cultural components in the subject's behavior, unless they are first told what to look for and are given help in finding it. I have had similar experiences with the reactions of trainee audiences who have witnessed the playing of encounters in front of the class. In spite of the portrayal of a contrasting national character by the actor and general introductory remarks about cultural differences by the instructor, most trainees fail to notice the subtle instances of cultural influences on the subject's cognitions until they are pointed out.

These experiences have convinced me that an additional special technique has to be used to make people see the cultural peculiarities in the subject behavior to be shown to them, without having to resort to a very directive method of instruction. My own biases with respect to the learning process involved in this kind of training suggest that a technique worth trying is the *repetition of conceptually related instances with variation of irrelevant variables*. This means that the trainee would be shown sequences of excerpts from the recordings,

each sequence focusing on a single cognition, but varying the form of expression of that cognition, the organizational affiliation of the subject, and the particular circumstances of its occurrence. The focus thus is on cognitions that are shared by the various groups of Americans for whom the process is intended, military advisors, Foreign Service Officers, Peace Corps Volunteers, and so forth. It is hoped that this technique of organizing the stimulus material will facilitate the discovery of the common element among the various excerpts of a sequence—the cultural nature of the given cognition. It should be recalled, of course, that this technique is combined with the portrayal by the actor of behavior reflecting cognitions of the contrasting national character. Whether or not it will be combined with the technique of showing the development of cultural self-awareness in a given subject remains to be determined.

One may ask where the line will be drawn between what are, and what are not, manifestations of the American national character. After all, the existing evidence regarding modal characteristics of adult middle-class American males is mostly impressionistic. How do we know that the cognitions selected for inclusion in the training process will be shared by most of the trainees? Although it is obviously unlikely that all of them will be shared, I see no reason for negative effects. I think that if some of our shoes do not fit, the trainee simply will not wear them.

There are a number of difficulties with the procedure I have outlined. Sometimes the behavioral manifestation of a particular cognition of the subject is not quite as clear as one would like it to be for instructional purposes. The responses by the actor do not always reflect the contrasting cognitions that he has been instructed to portray. Some participants fail to stay within the limits of the instructions, causing the actor to fumble. A few may have peculiarities in their looks, mannerisms, or speech, that are distracting. And, as noted earlier, some subjects are atypical with respect to the extent to which they reflect the American national character. For these reasons, it appears likely that the recordings of spontaneous interactions will have to be supplemented by rehearsed interactions in which actors play both roles. The scripts for such scenes would, of course, be based on spontaneous interactions with actual subjects, and only the needed excerpts would be recorded.

Instructor-Free Administration

It is planned to prepare all stimulus materials necessary to administer the training process without an instructor. This means that in addition to the selected video sequences, the following components of instruction will be needed:

(1) A general introduction to explain the concept of cultural self-awareness and the purpose of the training process.

(2) An explanation of the circumstances of the interactions from which the excerpts were obtained.
(3) Specific introductions for each sequence of excerpts.
(4) Questions to follow each sequence, to determine whether the trainees have discovered the common cognitive element and its cultural nature.
(5) Explanations of the relation between that element and American cultural premises and values.

All of these materials will be recorded for video presentation. The trainees will have to respond to the questions on answer sheets in order to involve them actively in the learning process. Approximately 14 hours of training time are envisioned, not counting time for classroom discussion.

Evaluation

The stated aim of the instructional program is the development of cultural self-awareness, and the achievement of this aim should result in certain desirable behavioral consequences. The evaluation will focus on such consequences.

The cost of assessing the training effects through observation of trainees' behavior on the job would be prohibitive. Instead, the planned evaluation will take advantage of the fact that the live encounters between the role-playing subjects and the actor appear to be excellent vehicles for assessing training effects. The following is a resume of the envisioned evaluation procedure.

Trainees are selected for the evaluation and divided into an experimental and a control group. Preferably, they would have completed all other training for their overseas assignment at that time. The instructional program is administered to the experimental group. The control group spends an equal amount of time with films and readings selected by experts as being the best for preparing Americans for interpersonal interaction in a foreign culture.

At the completion of the program, each trainee participates in a role-playing situation of the type described earlier. That situation would be different from those used in the development of the instructional program, and a different actor would play the role of the foreigner. The interaction is recorded on video tape. The trainee's performance in this situation is evaluated by a panel of judges.

Guidelines will have been prepared for the judges to rate each trainee according to a number of indices—among them, behavior intended to determine how the host-country national perceives the encounter and how he feels about it; behavior intended to discover what assumptions the host-country national makes about the things with which the trainee is concerned; relative absence of trainee behavior indicating lack of awareness of his own assumptions, or lack of awareness that these assumptions may not be shared by the host-country national; attempts by the trainee to communicate in terms likely to be meaningful to the host-country national; and accuracy of trainee interpretation

of the host-country national's behavior. Parts of this evaluation will require that the trainee be interviewed after his role-playing.

Summary

Certain considerations have led to the decision to design a training process for developing cultural self-awareness, that is, awareness of the cultural nature of one's own cognitions. The essential component of the process is the presentation of sequences of excerpts from video-taped spontaneous interactions of Americans with a foreigner in simulated on-the-job encounters. The foreigner is an actor trained to portray a contrasting national character. The sequences are arranged to vary irrelevant variables. Each sequence shows different behavioral manifestations of a particular cognition, by different kinds of Americans, and under different circumstances. The common element in each sequence is the cognition and its relation to American cultural premises and values. The presentation of these sequences to trainees will be accompanied by all the materials needed to administer the process without an instructor.

There is also an evaluation procedure that would focus on the behavioral consequences of this training process.

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13. ABSTRACT
In this paper the design of a training process for developing cultural self-awareness—awareness of the cultural nature of one's own cognitions—is described. Spontaneous interactions of Americans with foreigners in simulated on-the-job encounters are video-taped. Different behavioral manifestations of particular cognitions and their relation to American cultural premises and values are shown in sequences of video-taped excerpts used for training. The training is intended to enhance the effectiveness of U.S. personnel in overseas assignments.

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