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The Impact of Culture and Society on Crisis Perception, Management, and Learning in the Indian context

Mrudula Anne
Texas A&M University

Jia Wang
Texas A&M University

Deborah Chang
Texas A&M University and TCALL

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Mrudula Anne, Texas A&M University, USA
Jia Wang, Texas A&M University, USA
Deborah Chang, TCALL, Texas A&M University, USA

Abstract: *It was tough going through so many failures that time. I realized most of the things I was after are not going to come to me. So, as a punishment, I did one year long-term and gave the EAMCET exam. During this one year, I learnt a lot about life, the importance of planning ahead and putting the hard work. It changed the way I approached life. It made me realize that nothing in this world comes to you unless you work towards it.*

Participant, Summer 2011

Introduction

Transformative perspective has gained a lot of popularity in the recent years in terms of different concepts like transformative leadership (Astin & Astin, 2001), transformative justice (Morris, 1994), transformative technology (Brent, 1991), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), transformative change (Lichtenstein, 2000) and the like. The current study aims to explore the relationship between culture and transformative perspective while delving into the impact of society and culture on transformative learning experiences of individuals. The paper further explores how perceptions and approaches to crisis management are influenced by an individual's cultural underpinnings. This paper draws upon the lived experiences of 66 Indian individuals who have been studied through face-to-face and email interviews during the spring and summer semesters of 2011.

Purpose

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of culture on perception, and management of crisis while examining the transformative learning experiences of individuals in the Indian context. Data was collected during the Spring and Summer 2010 semesters through 66 face-to-face and email interviews. Some of the interviews were conducted in the US, while some in India. All the participants were from India and more than 20 years of age.

Conceptual Framework

The current paper is guided by three theoretical frameworks: 1) research on culture with Hofstede's cultural model as the focus, 2) transformative learning theory and change, and 3) crisis management. This section gives a brief summary of the three bodies of literature.

Culture, according to Trompenaars (1994), is a shared way of understanding and making meaning of the world by a group of individuals. Individual's actions and behavior is often guided

by his/her cultural underpinnings (Geertz, 1973), which are invisible and unwritten norms of a society (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). While the core of a culture remains the same, the outer layers are constantly evolving (Holden, 2002), thus making it a more complex phenomenon to understand (Triandis, 1995). Based on the behavior of individuals from 50 different countries Hofstede (1980, 1983) proposed five major dimensions of culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity, individualism, and long term orientation. In his research Hofstede (1980, 1983), identified power distance and long term orientation as the first and second highest dimensions in the Indian culture, followed by Masculinity. The remaining two dimensions, individualism and uncertainty avoidance scored less in this context.

Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1991), deals with "perspective transformation, which is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise action upon these new understandings" (p. 167). The learning process for an individual involves integrating new ideas to the existing meaning structures. These meaning structures according to Mezirow (1991) are reference frames which are situated in an individual's culture and context of the experience. A crisis or a critical incident tends to challenge the beliefs and assumptions held by an individual, thus resulting in critical reflection and rational discourse. While this may change or reinforce the existing world views, the whole process and the experience of learning is situated in a cultural and societal context which plays a vital role and is existent sub consciously making it invisible at the surface.

While there is no one agreed on definition of crisis, it is in the general consensus that a crisis event is highly unexpected and uncertain in nature. Hutchins and Wang, (2008) stated that in spite of its low rate of occurrence, a crisis event has a huge impact and posits a challenge to the decision making process. Crisis, as defined by Rosenthal, Hart, and Charles (1997) is a threat to the basic norms and values of a society, which demands making decisions under pressure for time and uncertain situations. Scholars employ various lenses like cognitive, psychological, and socio-political, to study different approaches to crisis situations (Hutchins & Wang, 2008). Context and culture play an important role in an individual's meaning making and decision making processes, thus affecting one's transformative learning experience.

Method

The goal of this study was to collect qualitative data that can be used to understand the transformative learning experiences of Indians residing in the United States and India. The current study focuses on the experiences of 66 participants (both female and male). Participation was voluntary and participants were recruited through emails, phone calls and personal meetings.

Interviewing was the primary technique used to collect data. The time and interview site were selected based on participant's convenience. While 21 interviews were face-to-face, the remaining 45 were through emails. The participants were asked to define crisis and recall a critical incident or a crisis they faced in their lives. Further questions helped explore different strategies used by the participants to deal with the crisis situations and their experiences. Notes were taken down by the researcher and were transcribed only after approval by the participants. In case of email responses the written responses were transcribed directly. A thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected.

Findings

Findings from the study suggest that culture does play an important role in the way individuals handled crisis and perceived the learning experience. The findings are grouped into three categories a) perception of crisis, b) types of crises and management strategies and c) learning experience of the participants.

Perception of Crisis

Common themes were identified in the participant's perceptions of crisis. While some of them described crisis as an unexpected situation, others defined it as a situation where time and decision making are vital. Crisis was also perceived as an opportunity to learn and a challenge by few while others felt helpless and unable to make a decision. Though all participants shared the same Indian culture, their perceptions about crisis were varied and seemed to be influenced by many other factors like family, education, and upbringing.

Types of Crisis and Management Strategies

Participants identified various types of crises or critical incidents they encountered both in their professional and personal lives. Many of the participants struggled identifying a crisis event in their life and this may be because of the collectivistic orientation of the Indian culture. Strong familial ties, and parents protecting their children for a long time, are some of the reasons why many participants have not experienced critical incidents or crisis in their lives. There were some common themes observed throughout the data. Academic performance of kids is regarded as prestige for the family and this pressure for performance was the most commonly mentioned crisis. Ten participants discussed the pressure they faced to do well in academics at different points in their educational journey. 15 participants mentioned facing difficulty balancing familial and individual expectations.

Attachment to family and the role of family members in making important decisions like career path; marriage, was evident from the experiences shared by the participants. Leaving home for education and job was identified as a critical incident by 12 participants. Death of a loved one; divorce; unemployment; road accident were some of the crises events mentioned by the participants.

Based on the different crisis management strategies mentioned by participants, we can divide crisis handling styles into three major categories. The first group called *fighters* who comprise sixty-one percent of the participants persevered during a crisis situation. They used various strategies like reaching out to professional and personal networks; using Ishikawa diagram to identify strengths and weaknesses to tackle the situation; being patient and courageous and such to cope with crisis situations.

Thirty-three percent of the participants fall under the second group called *compromisers* who chose to avoid confrontations and to find a middle-ground. Some of the strategies they used are adapting to the surroundings; accepting and living with the reality and such. Sixteen percent of the participants belonged to the third group called *avoiders* who felt helpless in a crisis situation and left the outcome to God. Waiting for God to open the right door; reporting to higher authority and stepping aside were some of the crisis handling strategies mentioned by participants in this group.

Learning Experiences of the Participants

While 66 individuals were interviewed, only 33 revolved around transformative learning experiences of the participants. This group of 33 consisted of 19 *fighters,* 10 *compromisers* and four *avoiders.* While some of the participants talked about how the crisis event reinforced their beliefs, others talked about how coping with the event helped them reprioritize their life, and how it transformed some of their relationships. Some of the participants further mentioned the vital role cultural and familial values played in helping them cope with the situation.   Different types of crisis events like death of a loved one; personal accident or health emergency; unemployment; crisis at job, gender and class discrimination were mentioned by the 19 participants in the category of *fighters.* The participant's learning experiences were varied and ranged from a change in perspective to critically examining their assumptions, to reinforcing already existing beliefs and value system. The perceived favorability or non- favorability of the outcome did not seem to have an impact on the learning experience of individuals. In the table below are listed few examples of the type of crisis event, handling strategies used and the learning experience of the participants.

Table 1
Nature of Crisis Events, Strategies Used and Learning Experiences

Categories	Nature of Crisis	Learning Experience
Fight	1. Death of younger brother.	1. Being a Brahmin, the rituals what we perform after one's death had a deep impact on me. I realized that every life has an end, and we have to live life to the fullest when we have it.
	2. An accident that left me almost blinded in one eye.	2. The week that I was recuperating from the injury, I had a good solitary time to take stock of things in life. I decided to quit my technology job and look for a job that would

		help me align my interest (that is psychology) with my work. I managed to get a job that I dreamt of and since then it has been a dream run.
Compromise	1. Moving to another country for higher studies.	1. Broadened my idea about various and increased aspects like how do manage time, money and increased my tolerance for cultural difference.
	2. Academic performance.	2. I realized that talent alone is not enough to achieve a goal; it requires discipline and hard work. If given a second chance I will work towards achieving the goal.
Avoid (Give up)	1. Divorce	1. Crisis event gave a new perspective to life for me.
	2. Unemployment	2. It made me to introspect and change the way I look at various things including my own life.

Discussion

Findings in the study reveal that culture played an important role in shaping individual's learning experiences. Culture and society had profound influence on what was considered crisis or critical by the participants. While some experiences reinforced culturally instilled beliefs and values, some experiences led participants to critically question critically questions the existing assumptions and practices in the society.

Collectivistic Vs Individualistic Society

Participants shared both their personal and professional experiences. Out of the 33 who talked about their transformative learning experience only five of them were job or career related. Critical incidents related to selecting a career, or academic performance were intertwined with family and societal expectations. Hence, most of the transformative learning experiences narrated by participants were centered around family, and society. This may be due to the collectivistic culture of the Indian society.

Management strategies and learning experiences

Participant's perception of crisis directly influenced the way they handled the situation and shaped their learning experience as well. Among the group of participants who avoided the problem in a crisis situation, only two of them talked about how the situation changed the way they looked at things in life and helped them reprioritize. All the others in this group only mentioned that they trusted in God and waited for things to fall in place. *Compromisers* on the

other hand mentioned experiencing transformation of perspectives about various aspects depending on the situation they had to face. Some of them mentioned how the crisis or critical incident helped them reevaluate their own expectations and expectations others had on them, some others mentioned how the situation transformed their outlook towards important relationships and priorities in life and the remaining mentioned how the situation reinforced their existing beliefs and values.

Six participants from the group of *fighters* critically examined their assumptions and cultural beliefs and worked towards questioning these assumptions and age old beliefs. One of the participants shared how her family and society she grew up in believed that education is not important for girls and that girls are not good and academics. She talked about how hard she had to work in order to question these assumptions and prove them wrong. A couple of participants mentioned how the situation helped reinforce their beliefs and values instilled in them by their culture and family.

Implications

Societies, in today's world are no longer made of a homogenous group of people. There is an emerging trend of heterogeneous groups consisting of people from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Though all the individuals come together as a group or a community, they want to maintain their own identity in terms of culture, religious practices, and societal norms. It is evident from literature and the current study that culture shapes an individual's perspective towards transformative learning. It is important as adult educators to realize the importance and the influence, one's culture has on the learning process of an individual, in order to create a safe learning space and to employ strategies that facilitate overall growth of an individual.

The current study is one of the first that looks at crisis and crisis management from an adult learning perspective. This adds additional knowledge to the current literature base. Additionally by situating this study in the Indian context, it expands literature in adult education.

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