

Bridging the Interpersonal Gap between Nationals and Expatriates

Zsófi Seres Wilson

About myself

I am a trained Christian Psychologist. I studied Psychology at the University of Vienna, Austria, and then went on to complete a Master's program in Christian Psychology/Counseling in Germany. I was born in Hungary, have lived in 4 countries and I married an American—so God has given me quite some cross-cultural experiences. I became a Christian through an Evangelistic English Camp, organized by an American Mission Organization, and since then I have met many American missionaries.

With this personal background, I would like to facilitate a discussion with the goal of improving interpersonal relationships between expatriate missionaries and their national counterparts. First, as a group I would like us to identify various factors that help/hinder interpersonal relationships between nationals and expatriate missionaries. Then, we can explore ways to overcome these hindering factors. My desire is to facilitate an exchange of ideas and/or experiences, and for everyone to benefit from the richness of knowledge God has already given this group.

Group discussion:

Todd Hunnicutt's chart of the advantages/disadvantages of being an indigenous/expatriate facilitator caused me to think more about the disadvantages of an expatriate facilitator, and I thought that it would be worthwhile to devote some time to explore ways of how to make progress in these areas. My assumption is that a successful expatriate facilitator (or missionary in general) is someone who is able to adapt to the host culture well, and who is actively bridging the gap between himself/herself and the nationals. This paper is an exploration of this process. In the first part I will describe some interpersonal dynamics and in the second part I will list some practical suggestions on how to enhance the cultural adaptation in this region of the world.

“Know where you come from and where you are going.”

The Hebrew word for “to know” does not mean simply having head knowledge, but includes something that you have experienced, understood, felt.¹ This is a more holistic approach than what is normally understood by this word in our Western world. So if we take the Hebrew understanding of the word “know,” then you really only *know the culture you live in* if you have head knowledge about the different customs, history and mentality of the people, *plus* you are in the process of trying it out for yourself. This “trying out” has some limits, which is shaped by your personality, willingness, flexibility, endurance, your self-confidence, etc. For someone who has less self-confidence it is more threatening to “shake” up your old identity and to try out some new forms of living, thinking etc.

As the saying goes, you should also *know where you come from*. You do not need to deny your past or heritage, you should know it, own it, and live it. But if you are on the journey of getting to know and adapting to another culture, then you have to *enlarge* your

¹ See Strong's definition for *Yada'* (Strong's Number: 03045) available online here: <http://www.biblestudytools.net/Lexicons/Hebrew/hebrew.cgi?number=03045&version=>

identity. Stay true to your past or to your heritage, but also be open to learn and to embrace different ways of living. The extent to which you are able to get to know your host-country is also influenced by your work. For those of you who work regionally in several countries, it is a more challenging process since you are faced with several different cultures and languages. How much your family, especially your spouse is part of this “getting to know” process is also highly influential on the degree to which you can adapt culturally.

Self awareness: I think for the process of getting to know another culture, it is very important that you keep on growing in self-awareness. Without understanding yourself well, you will not be able to easily understand and adapt to a different culture. Take time for self-reflection: Why do you do things the way you do, what are your motives, fears, and un-dealt with issues from the past? What parts of your identity or behavior do you feel unable to expand and/or modify, and why? I think all Christians, but especially missionaries, need to consciously analyze and evaluate old ways of thinking, values and emotions, and patterns of behavior. This is *knowing where you come from*. Likewise, it is also important to *know where you are going*. Embrace new modes of living (habits, customs, mentality, etc) that are found in the new culture you live in, and let that challenge, shape and enrich your identity. Of course, the obvious limit of this change is if the change would be unbiblical, but in all those areas where it is not a sin but a question of habit, culture, or just a different way of living, you can give it a try so that you can understand where you are going. Without good self-awareness you won't be able to be really aware of your own home culture either and you will just keep on doing the things the way you are used too. You won't even notice the areas where you behave very “American”.

Nationals many times do not appreciate your efforts of being culturally assimilated but rather point out the ways you are not yet. Too much criticism can result in you drawing back to your “old” way and not trying to adapt anymore. In this case, I think it is important to strengthen your Christian identity: know who you are in Christ, so you don't have to rely too much on your “old cultural identity.” If you find your strength and self-confidence in Him more and more, you will be able to deal with the criticisms of the nationals in a constructive way and keep going on the journey of getting to know your host country.

Practical suggestions

Observing Holidays: Try to do something on the national holidays that will connect you more with the culture you live in. Do research on what the options might be, what people normally do on these days and pick one that you and your family would enjoy doing. Some examples: on mother's day try to encourage your kids to incorporate something Hungarian into their plans of how to surprise mommy, on Women's Day bring flowers to the ladies in your household and give some surprises to some of the national women you have contact with.

Home: How about talking with your spouse and try to make your home look a little bit more like those of your national friends? You might just start with one room or some details in a room. How about having sleepers at your home and using them from time to time?

Food: Try out new national flavors regularly and try it 10 to 15 times before you give up on it. Sometimes try to drink beverages without ice and other drinks that the nationals enjoy. Make a family “fork and knife” day one day per week, where everyone should eat with the fork in their left hand and the knife in their right hand.

Literature: Read some books, novels, children's stories, or whatever will help you understand how people think. If you are not able to do this in the native language, there are plenty of good translated books. Read political newspapers.

Meetings: Sideline breakfast meetings with nationals since breakfast meetings are generally not the norm in European culture. Also, fast-food restaurants for meetings do not make the native person feel like you are trying to adapt to his/her culture

Communication: Asking questions right away of people you meet seems to be an American habit. The European relationship speed is generally much slower, and instead of asking questions back and forth, people typically share something about themselves, and then wait for you to share something about yourself. So instead of asking questions back and forth, Europeans generally go through rounds of "sharing" back and forth. Also, be careful to approximate the same level of intimacy in sharing that the other person has offered. Going too deep, too quickly, can become problematic. Secondly, always assume that you do not exactly understand what the national is saying, so paraphrase or ask back several times to check if what you hear is what he/she intends to say. Work on your listening skills! You filter everything you hear through your personal and cultural lenses, so make extra effort to understand the nationals.

Language: Find a friend who is willing to talk to you in the native language on a regular basis. You could offer in exchange to speak English to him/her and use half of your time for that. Language study is slow, but never give up! It is worth your effort! Be persistent about changing to the native language even if the native speaker is a good English speaker. If you work regionally, I would suggest that you pick two of the languages of the countries where you spend the most time and learn those two.

Entertainment: Find out about what people in your host country do on weekends, in the evenings, during their vacation and try those activities out on a regular basis.

Jokes: Making jokes about your host country customs can be hurtful to nationals, even if they laugh with you. Be also aware that making jokes about a group (the host country) often reveals a need of strengthening your own group identity (American). A native might make a joke about his own country but then instead of continuing with another joke about your host country it might be a good idea to make a joke about your own culture. (This is similar to you making jokes about your own family but not appreciating if someone else does.)

Prayer: It is normal to feel frustrated after you have spent some time in the host country and you have got to know many of the weaknesses of the natives. If you are in this phase then keep asking God for a renewed love for the people around you.