
Research Notes

Cultural Challenges in Working Across Borders

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【Abstract】

This small-scale study explored issues of cultural competence and cultural difficulties that aid workers in an international non-governmental organization (NGO) face during global missions. The international NGO in this study is a multicultural and multinational organization that specializes in medical humanitarian aid and operates worldwide. The present study aimed to investigate how culturally competent aid workers in an international NGO perceived themselves to be and what cultural difficulties they experienced during international missions. The study employed a paper-based survey questionnaire that used a 5-point Likert scale and was distributed to aid workers ($n = 30$). The results of close-ended items show that participants were comfortable working with people from different socio-cultural backgrounds and sharing a space with a culturally diverse and mixed gender group of staff, but they were not similarly open to some issues pertaining to dietary habits and religious beliefs. Moreover, the open-ended responses indicate that participants' cultural difficulties varied and resulted from local cultures in the host country and internal cultures within the organization. The limitations of the study are also discussed, including the lack of sufficient data and a small sample size.

Key words: Culture, Cultural competence, International non-governmental organization

研究ノート

国境を越えて働く際の文化的課題

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【要 旨】

本研究は、国際非政府組織（NGO）で医療・人道援助を専門とする活動に従事する NGO スタッフが直面する文化的問題を調査した。本研究での NGO は、世界の様々な国の出身者が集まる多文化の組織であり、医療・人道支援を専門とし世界中で活動している。本研究の目的は、NGO スタッフが自己の文化的能力をどう評価しているかという点、またグローバルミッション中で直面した文化的問題を特定することであった。本研究では、5段階のリッカート尺度を使用した紙ベースの調査アンケートを採用し、30名のスタッフに配布した。その結果から、NGO スタッフは異なる社会・文化的背景を有する人々と共に働き、文化的に多様で性別混合のスタッフと生活空間を共有することが快適であると評価しているのに対し、食事や宗教的信念に関する問題については同様に適応できないことが判明した。さらに、グローバルミッション中に直面した文化的な問題は様々であり、ホスト国の文化だけでなく NGO 組織の内部文化にも起因することが判明した。アンケート調査におけるサンプルサイズやデータ不足など、本研究の限界についても述べる。

キーワード：文化、文化的能力、国際非政府組織

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1. Introduction

Due to political turmoil and democratic instability in many underdeveloped countries, the role of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is sought around the world today (Chang, 2005). A growing number of international NGOs have been brought in to tackle a wide range of transnational problems including natural disasters, poverty, and humanitarian aid across borders. Human resource development training for expatriate aid workers is crucial for their safety and successful performance when they face accidents or cultural conflicts (Chang, 2005). When working across national boundaries in humanitarian aid, cultural factors significantly impact organizations' operations both internally and externally (Chang, 2005). International NGO employees face diverse cultures when working with expatriate staff within the organization as well as local staff and people in host countries. While attempting to accept and respect other cultures, expatriate workers still carry their own cultural values, which may cause negative feelings such as frustration and confusion (Chang, 2007b). Therefore, cultural competence is critical for aid workers to communicate with the people involved and make their international missions successful (Chang, 2007a; Remington, 2017).

Cultural competence is defined as an integrative, transformative, and developmental process by many scholars (Chang, 2007a). Taylor (1994) views intercultural competence as “an adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture” (p. 154). McPhatter and Ganaway (2003) view it as “the ability to transform knowledge and cultural awareness” into practice (p. 105). Chang (2007a) defines it as “a process composed through experience of internal discovery and external adjustment” (p. 190). This study follows the Chang's definition and views

cultural competence as a continuing learning process to better adjust to the intercultural environment.

With regard to culture, this study applies two definitions from cultural studies. The concept of culture is broad and unlimited and refers to “people's diverse ethnic backgrounds and each nation's unique socioeconomic situation” (Chang, 2005, p. 455). Culture is also dynamic and “something that can be learned,” and “it is ever in a state of flux and, within every culture, exist subcultures based on religion, personalities, socioeconomic status, education, and much more” (Remington, 2017, p. 40).

In cultural studies, two different approaches—*etic* and *emic*—are used in many fields (Chang, 2009). In the *etic* approach, behavior is studied from outside a particular system, while the *emic* approach studies behavior from inside the system (Pike, 1967). Whereas *etic* analyses make universal generalizations across cultures, Chang (2009) advocates the application of *emic* approaches for cultural understanding in the field of human resource development with the potential to promote learning for cultural competence. She maintains that “To understand a culture, the *emic* perspective asks researchers and practitioners to touch the field, go to the people, observe, contact, and get involved (p. 22)”.

Chang (2007a) conducted a study with an *emic* approach based on participatory observation and interviews to examine Taiwanese humanitarian workers' cultural experiences and their impact on cultural competence when serving in international humanitarian corps. In this study, three levels in the cultural competence process were identified when aid workers met with different cultures: *peripheral* (encounter and recognize), *cognitive* (familiarize and adjust), and *reflective* (transform and enlighten) levels. These three levels suggest how the international aid workers developed their cultural competence. In this study, the author drew three conclusions: (a) not all participants had experienced all three levels, (b)

those who reached the reflective level were more likely to treat people equally, and (c) their professional backgrounds often helped open the door to encountering and understanding a new culture. Moreover, Chang emphasized the importance of cultural competence for international aid workers, in that it helped them accomplish their missions successfully and prevent accidents and conflicts.

Remington (2017) conducted a mixed methods study of cultural competence with an emic approach in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Her findings from interviews and surveys with three groups of participants (NGO agencies, aid workers, and beneficiaries) indicate that few aid workers were fully equipped to work in the post-disaster response and recovery owing to a lack of cultural training; nearly half of all aid workers in 44 NGOs had received no cross-cultural competence training. The author posited that to be culturally competent, it is necessary to develop four components: *cultural knowledge* (context-specific knowledge), *personal attributes* (the internal attitudes to put knowledge into practice), *emotive skills* (the ability to manage one's own and others' emotions), and *expertise* (experience and job-specific skills). The author further suggested that comprehensive training, along with friendships with community members, immersion in local cultures, and mentorship should be implemented for aid workers to acquire cultural competence.

These studies have provided insight into the current situation of research on cultural competence among aid workers who engage in humanitarian aid and post-disaster response and recovery in international NGOs. Cultural competence plays a crucial role in effective cross-cultural communication and successful international operations. However, research into cultural competence in international NGOs and training for multicultural teams of aid workers has still been underrepresented (Chang,

2005; Littrell & Salas, 2005; Remington, 2017), as the scope of NGO activities, the duration and location of missions, and the background of workers vary. It would be meaningful to conduct more research on international NGOs to obtain a better understanding of cultural competence among aid workers in multicultural and multilingual organizations. The present study explores cultural issues among aid workers in an international NGO that provides medical support at the global level. The goals of the study are to investigate their cultural competence as well as cultural difficulties they face when engaging in international missions, using a survey questionnaire. This study also aims to contribute to providing information on cultural issues for the design of future training in international NGOs. Finally, this article is a companion paper to Orikasa (2020) which addresses language challenges faced by international NGO staff.

2. Method

The present study investigated two issues: (a) cultural issues faced by staff in an international NGO to determine their level of self-perceived cultural competence; and (b) the cultural difficulties they faced on missions. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How culturally competent do staff working on international missions perceive themselves to be?
2. What cultural issues are challenging to staff when working on international missions?

2.1. Participating organization

The participants in this study belonged to an international NGO based in Switzerland that specializes in providing medical humanitarian aid to those in need due to conflict, epidemics, malnutrition, or exclusion from healthcare. The international NGO comprises a linguistically diverse

cohort of people and has approximately 47,000 local and expatriate staff working in 70 countries. The NGO has a policy stipulating that English be used as the common language during training and international missions. The organization, however, does not yet have a language and cultural training program for those engaged in its missions around the world.

2.2. Participants

Thirty expatriate staff ($n = 30$) participated in the survey questionnaire. Table 1 shows the participants' descriptive information (gender, nationality, educational background, first language, number of additional languages, and number of residential countries). In terms of additional information, the duration of their employment with this NGO varied

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants

Category	$n = 30$				
Gender	12	Male	40.0%		
	18	Female	60.0%		
Age	24 to 54 years				
		Mode = 34 years	Mean = 34.9 years		
Nationality	8	Spanish	26.7%	1 Czech 3.3%	
	4	Kenyan	13.3%	1 Colombian 3.3%	
	3	Argentinian	10.0%	1 French 3.3%	
	3	USA	10.0%	1 German 3.3%	
	2	Greek	6.7%	1 Indian 3.3%	
	2	UK	6.7%	1 Somali 3.3%	
	1	Algerian	3.3%	1 Swiss 3.3%	
	Education	15	BA/BC	50.0%	
		4	MA	13.3%	
		7	MD	23.3%	
3		Ph.D/Doctor	10.0%		
1		Other	3.3%		
First language	10	Spanish	33.0%	1 Basque 3.3%	
	8	English	26.7%	1 Catalan 3.3%	
	2	French	6.7%	1 Czech 3.3%	
	2	Greek	6.7%	1 German 3.3%	
	1	Arabic	3.3%	1 Kikuyu 3.3%	
	1	Assamese	3.3%	1 Kiswahili 3.3%	
	Additional languages	10	1 language	33.0%	
11		2 languages	36.7%		
7		3 languages	23.3%		
1		4 languages	3.3%		
1		7 languages	3.3%		
Overseas residence	1 to 6 countries				
		Mode = 2 countries	Mean = 2.3 countries		

from 3 weeks to 10 years (mean = 3.1 years). They worked in different sections in the organization including medical, logistics, and finance. They were randomly selected by the training department during a training seminar on crisis management in Nairobi, Kenya and given about 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. For designing the questionnaire, a contact person provided information on missions from a staff perspective. Based in Tokyo, this individual was directly involved with several global health emergencies.

2.3. Questionnaire design

The survey questionnaire was designed based on the information provided by the contact person and focused on cultural issues that international NGO staff may encounter both within and outside their organization on global missions. The paper-based questionnaire consisted of 10 items written in English, including one open-ended question¹⁾ and nine close-ended questions scored on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). To measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire's reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used.

2.4. Procedure

The author emailed the survey questionnaire as an attachment to the contact person and requested that it be distributed during the training seminar in Kenya. The training department randomly selected 30 participants, and the contact person monitored them during the 20-minute period provided for completion of the questionnaire. The return rate was 100%; all questionnaires were collected and mailed to the author on completion.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the results of the close-ended questions about cultural issues. To measure the

Table 2. Results of Close-ended Questions

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	strongly disagree		neutral		strongly agree
				1	2	3	4	5
1 I am comfortable working with expat staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds.	30	4.2	0.5	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	76.7%	20.0%
2 I am comfortable working with local staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds.	30	4.2	0.4	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	76.7%	23.3%
3 I am comfortable working with local people in areas where missions are conducted.	30	4.2	0.4	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	76.7%	23.3%
4 I try to eat food which is unfamiliar to me during missions, if that is the only food available.	30	2.8	1.2	6.7%	53.3%	0.0%	30.0%	10.0%
5 I try to eat the food which is against my dietary habits or religious beliefs, if that is the only food available.	30	2.2	0.9	13.3%	70.0%	6.7%	6.7%	3.3%
6 I give up on the food/drink I like, if that is not available in areas where mission are conducted.	30	3.6	0.9	0.0%	23.3%	3.3%	66.7%	6.7%
7 I give up on the food/drink I like, if that is against traditional and religious beliefs in areas where missions are conducted.	30	3.9	0.9	0.0%	13.3%	3.3%	60.0%	23.3%
8 I feel comfortable sharing a room to sleep with a group of staff who are from different socio-cultural backgrounds.	30	3.9	0.6	0.0%	6.7%	3.3%	83.3%	6.7%
9 I feel comfortable sharing a room to sleep with a group of staff who are of different genders.	30	3.4	1.2	10.0%	20.0%	0.0%	60.0%	10.0%

Note. *n*: number, *M*: mean, *SD*: standard deviation

reliability of the survey items, the Cronbach alpha (α) internal-consistency method was used. For all items in the close-ended questions (Q1-Q9), the reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .72$).

Q1, Q2, and Q3 were concerned with comfort working with staff members and people from different backgrounds. In Q1, 29 respondents (96.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable working with their expatriate staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds, with one (3.3%) remaining neutral. In Q2 and Q3, all 30 (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable working with local staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds and local people in areas where missions were conducted, respectively.

Q4, Q5, Q6, and Q7 concerned food and drink consumed during missions. In Q4, 12 respondents (40%) agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to eat food that was unfamiliar to them during missions, if it was the only food available, while 18 (60%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Q5, three

respondents (10%) agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to eat food that was against their dietary habits or religious beliefs, if it was the only food available, whereas 25 (83.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and two (6.7%) were neutral. In Q6, 22 respondents (73.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they gave up the food or drink they liked, if it was unavailable in areas where missions were conducted, while seven (23.3%) disagreed, with one (3.3%) neutral. In Q7, 25 respondents (83.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they gave up the food or drink they liked, if it was against traditional and religious beliefs in areas where missions were conducted, four (13.3%) disagreed, and one (3.3%) was neutral.

Table 3 shows the results of the open-ended question on culturally difficult experiences (Q10). Twenty-one respondents voiced their cultural difficulties during global missions, and, of these, only six mentioned the name of countries or regions (i.e., Congo, Darfur, Haiti, Niger, and Yemen) with no detailed description of cultural problems (this

Table 3. Results of Open-ended Response

Category	Location	Frequency
No privacy	India, Indonesia, Niger	4
Gender	Yemen, Nigeria	3
Boredom	Nigeria, S.Sudan	2
Poverty	India, Sudan	2
Safety	Angola, Palestine	2
Religion	Yemen	1
Caste system	India	1
Politeness	(Somalis)	1
Language	Sudan	1
Total		17

information is not included in the table). Fourteen respondents, although not all of them, elaborated on their problems and pointed out more than one issue. In addition, although Q10 asked about cultural difficulties, one staff indicated that he had no cultural problems on missions.

Four respondents cited the lack of privacy in India, Indonesia, and Niger. In Indonesia, one noted that he had to share a room with one bathroom with more than 30 mixed gender expat staff for living and sleeping. Three mentioned gender issues, as the role of women in society in Yemen and Nigeria was hard to accept; one noted that having a fourth or fifth wife in Nigeria was hard to understand. Moreover, two expressed boredom on missions in South Sudan and Niger. Poverty was also reported by two respondents: in India, the poverty was extreme, and the exploitation of poor women and children was extremely bad, and in Sudan, the level of poverty and desperation was the worst he had ever seen, and rape and mutilation were common. Furthermore, two highlighted safety issues, including attacks by the Israeli forces in Palestine and land mines in Angola. The following issues were raised by one respondent each: in Yemen, their Muslim culture was very conservative; in India, the caste system was horrible; a very polite form of interaction was required with Somalis to avoid incidents. The last issue is concerned with the language spoken by

colleagues; in Sudan, the team was mainly Spanish, and they communicated in Spanish all the time, despite the proximity of an English speaker.

4. Discussion

This section addresses the two research questions based on the results of the questionnaire reported in the previous section. Research question 1 concerns how culturally competent international NGO staff perceive themselves to be on global missions. All or almost all respondents were positive about working with expat and local staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Q1 and Q2) and with local people in host countries (Q3). 90% were also flexible about using living spaces with staff from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Q8). However, this number dipped to 70% when asked about sharing a mixed gender room with staff (Q9). Moreover, they had a favorable attitude toward respecting local cultures and environment as 83.3% would forgo their favorite food or drink that was against the traditions of the host country (Q7), and 73.4% would forgo their favorite food or drink that was not available in the host country (Q6). In sum, the results from the above-mentioned seven questions indicate that the respondents seemed to be culturally competent: they were confident working with people from different cultural backgrounds, sharing space with those of different genders, willing to accept local cultures, and adaptable to new cultures in host countries.

On the other hand, there were certain issues they could not adjust to. Most (60%) of the respondents refused to eat unfamiliar food in the host country (Q4), and 83.3% also refused to eat food that went against their dietary habits or religious beliefs (Q5). These results suggest that rejecting unfamiliar food and maintaining eating habits and religious beliefs take priority over adjusting to a new culture. The Q4 result relates to personal attributes that refer to

internal attitudes toward putting cultural knowledge into practice (Remington, 2017). While personal attributes were considered a very important factor of cultural competence (Remington, 2017), many respondents in this study had not yet reached the level of putting new cultural knowledge into practice by trying unfamiliar food. Moreover, although Q5 is possibly misleading, as it inquired about two issues—dietary habits and religious beliefs—it can be argued that the result is consistent with what Chang (2007b) noted; even when they decide to accept and respect other cultures, people still carry their own cultural values that could cause negative feelings toward unfamiliar cultures. Therefore, some participants may require more time to adjust themselves to a new culture, or they may be unable to transform themselves to adapt to such culture, as the three levels of the cultural competence process are not necessarily reachable (Chang, 2007a).

Research question 2 concerns cultural difficulties the international NGO staff face on global missions. Among the 17 responses to the open-ended question (Q10), most were concerned with cultural issues associated with local cultures in host countries: gender issues, social system, poverty, religion, safety, boredom, and politeness. These cultural difficulties presumably arise from differences in or unfamiliarity with customs and values in host countries. As Remington (2017) suggested, these difficulties may be overcome by acquiring cultural competence, along with developing relationships with locals, being immersed into local communities, and mentoring. However, such suggestions may be inapplicable to the participants in this study, given that their missions may not remain in one location long enough to build such rapport with locals. Furthermore, safety issues such as conflicts in Palestine and land mines in Angola would not be addressed by these suggestions, and such safety issues are hard to overcome, even for those workers

with a wide range of international experiences. Therefore, depending on the difficulties faced, the appropriate approaches should be prepared and provided, ideally before their arrival in the host country, in the form of official training.

Several respondents also mentioned issues that occur within their organization. In one case, privacy was not respected in missions in India, Indonesia, and Niger, as staff had to share and live in a small space with many mixed gender staff members. Their accounts indicate that even if they would like private space for themselves, their request is not always granted. Presumably, the nature of their work requires aid workers to be prepared and open to work in any location and any unpredictable situations, such as devastating disasters or ongoing conflicts; it would be impossible to secure safe and spacious accommodation for anyone. Moreover, the lack of privacy does not pertain to cultural competence, and it would be better to treat this problem separately and resolve it in the mission team or the organization by discussing the issue during the pre-departure training.

Furthermore, one respondent cited a language-related issue; a group of Spanish teammates spoke their mother language at all times during a mission in Sudan, even in the presence of a native English-speaking staff member. This is similar to a report from Orikasa (2020), in which, in a mission in Haiti, all expatriate staff spoke Spanish, not using English as the common language. When the majority of people share and speak the same language, they tend to be in a comfort zone and may pay little attention to those who do not speak the language. However, self-reflection is needed to change such behavior. As Remington (2017) noted, this type of attitude tends to make people more selective about who they talk to and discourage learning of accurate cultural knowledge, resulting in a biased view of the host country. Moreover, language issues in this study

should be treated separately from cultural competence and solved within the organization, as they are complex in multilingual organizations (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012; Welch & Welch, 2008).

In the open-ended responses, respondents conveyed the messages that they had experienced very challenging times in missions because of cultural differences. Though limited, it is worth listening to their voices, which are rarely heard (Remington, 2017). Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. One shortcoming is the lack of detailed descriptions of actual cultural challenges during global missions. The study would have benefitted from a larger sample size and data triangulation that included interviews with participants to achieve a better understanding of the cultural challenges they experienced on duty. In addition, future studies should take an emic approach, to hear voices within the organization (Chang, 2009), ideally through on-site observation of their missions.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated how culturally competent international NGO staff perceived themselves, along with the cultural difficulties they faced during global missions. The results from the questionnaire show that the participants perceived themselves to be culturally competent when working with staff and local people from different socio-cultural backgrounds and sharing a space with a culturally diverse or mixed gender group of staff. It also became clear that they were not equally open to certain issues such as dietary habits or religious beliefs. In addition, their cultural difficulties on global missions were identified. These difficulties, which arise from local cultures in the host country or from internal cultures in the organization, varied among respondents. This study can serve as a starting point to determine issues in cultural

competence in this particular group of participants. However, solutions to such difficulties were not found or suggested. To explore solutions to these cultural difficulties and better understand the cultural competence of aid workers in multicultural and multinational organizations, future research should investigate how such difficulties are overcome and what factors contribute to cultural competence.

Footnotes

- 1) Open-ended question (Q10): What was the most culturally difficult mission you have ever experienced? Please write your comment.

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