On the Implications of Culture Shock on Immigrant Workers and their Workloads

Archit Kalra¹

¹: Student at Carmel High School

Abstract:

Given the increased proportion of foreign workers within the American workforce over the past few years, one must consider the ways in which disparities still exist between them and native workers, and how to eliminate these disparities in order to allow for more economically efficient job performance. Culture shock is one of the key factors that has caused work disparities between foreign workers and native workers, especially due to the increases in fatigue, stress, and fear of obtaining permanent residency. This paper suggests that culture shock is largely responsible for increased work overload in foreign workers, and argues that numerous vicious cycles associated with it, such as sparks of tiredness and insecurity, eventually cause repeated instances of work stress that contribute to greater inefficiency over time, which can be solved by being more aware of possible acclimation programs that help workers become more accustomed to their new environments.

Keywords: culture shock, work overload, foreign workers, American workforce, fatigue, permanent residency, job performance, job insecurity

In 2019, foreign-born workers comprised a 28.4-million strong workforce within the United States, 17.4% of the total labor force, and made up a plurality of workers in industries such as production, transportation, and natural resources (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Moreover, Cilluffo and Cohn (2017) from the Pew Research Center found immigrants will be largely responsible for the national population growth for at least the next decade, and thus first-generation and second-generation children of immigrants will comprise an even larger portion of the workforce within the coming years. Given that foreign-born workers currently play and will continue to play a major role in the American economy, it seems given that they should be working similar hours and receiving equal wages and treatment as their non-foreign coworkers. However, numerous studies have found this is not the case, with culture shock, defined by Kalervo Oberg as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse,” (Oberg, 1954) being one of the main stressors forcing foreign-born workers to accept less equitable conditions and become overworked. Thompson (2019) puts some of the implications of this into perspective with regard to the rise of workism—the personal drive to work for the sake of working. Since foreign workers are inherently more susceptible to being overworked, it is arguable that the fine line between subtle workism and blatant overworking may be blurred solely by culture shock and how it affects foreign workers. If this issue is not solved, it will likely increase inefficiency due to worker burnout, decrease worker satisfaction, and decrease the workforce due to slower immigrant-driven population growth. Indubitably, culture shock causes foreign workers to be more susceptible and likely to become voluntarily overworked because they get fatigued when trying to replicate prior work cultures, have increased concerns about gaining permanent residence, and retain insecurity associated with constantly changing work fields. Additionally,

despite suggestions that culture shock is negligible when workers transfer to another location, albeit with a similar work environment, it is undeniable that culture shock applies to interpersonal discussions and employer-employee and customer-employee interactions as well, which are not necessarily considered when discussing the spatial layout of the workplace.

Culture shock causes foreign workers to become fatigued in their attempts to emulate their prior work cultures, which causes them to become more susceptible to exploitation within the United States. Avery, Tonidandel, Volpone, and Raghuram (2010), who conducted a study of immigrant and native workers within the United States, found that the perceived effect of workload was “more than five times larger for immigrants than for natives.” The sheer disproportionation of this statistic in itself shows how immigrants face a greater work overload because they are immigrants, much of which can be attributed to culture shock in the form of fatigue. As per Dr. Neil Goodman, president of Global Dynamics, Inc., a corporation centered around cultural nuances in global businesses, culture shock is “an overstimulation of the central nervous system. There are so many differences that you feel totally fatigued” (Smith, 2020). Since foreign workers need additional time to become accustomed to their new work environments and often face challenges in successfully emulating some of their prior work ethic, it is logical that fatigue is a symptom of culture shock. To confirm this via a transitive analysis, it can be noted that Ricci, Chee, Lorandean, and Berger (2007) have already shown that fatigued workers are almost 2.5 times as likely to experience health-related loss of productivity, indicating that culture shock in itself can cause loss of work productivity. Since culture shock by definition affects foreigners, it acts as a direct agent of disparity and reduced productivity. As an example, Dooley and Yamamitsu (2019) of the New York Times describe how Japan’s work culture has crept towards workism and toxicity against breaks. Given that work cultures

between Japan and the United States are extremely different in this regard, it is worth discussing how foreign workers are especially vulnerable to over-working when they are already used to being overworked, or expect having to work long hours even if they may not be expected to do so, which would imply increased overload and fatigue, yet another downward spiral into work inefficiency and damage. Certainly, this continuous cycle from culture shock-associated fatigue to loss of productivity indicates how inefficiency and work overload can easily arise in foreign workers.

In addition to fatigue, culture shock often induces fears about obtaining permanent residence (a Green Card) in foreign workers, which predisposes them to being voluntarily overworked. Nitesh Jain, an Indian-born doctor working in the United States, argued that employees who are dependent on their employers for visa sponsorship are often subject to higher standards of work as well as length of work shifts, and mentioned that they “often see our wages suppressed, or we are expected to work 24/7 shifts instead of the 12-hour shifts worked by colleagues who are citizens” (Jain, 2017). Although not all foreign workers are doctors and not all will face such stark contrasts, an obvious implication of this is the inevitable plasticity of an immigrant’s job situation as well as standing in the eyes of their employer—given what Jain has said, it is quite possible that any threat to visa sponsorship can lead to employees becoming disproportionately overworked and fatigued in their hopes of satisfying their employers, which, as mentioned earlier in the paper, can cause a vicious cycle including loss of productivity and work inefficiency. Culture shock specifically plays a role in this calamity because it in itself serves as a catalyst for fear; the psychosomatic impact of being immersed in an entirely new environment causes increased wariness and stress about what will happen in the future. Kalervo Oberg, the Canadian anthropologist who coined the term “culture shock,” himself said one of the key

symptoms of the disorder is “excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured” (Oberg, 1954). This fear arguably manifests itself in the form of vulnerability to exploitation, especially since one of the most consequential injuries to an immigrant is deportation (Gordon, 2017). Silva Mathema, an associate director for Policy at the Center for American Progress, described how such fears are essentially impossible to act upon in certain situations, like with immigrants on a J-1 visa waiver, due to government restrictions—since workers are generally not allowed to switch jobs during the three-year duration of the waiver disregarding extenuating circumstances, many foreign workers are indirectly forced to continue working in oppressive situations that limit their salary, overwork them, and prevent them from expanding their line of work all while bolstering their concerns of their visa status (Mathema, 2019). All of these factors combined arguably show a clear narrative that culture shock is responsible for fears about visa status and permanent residence, which facilitate exploitation and overworking.

One intrinsic psychosomatic response to culture shock that associates itself with concerns about visa status is the insecurity associated with the possibility of having to change jobs in the near future. Liu, Bowe, Li, Too, and LaMontagne (2020) suggest that culture shock is one of many factors that can contribute to higher risk of adverse psychosocial outcomes in foreign workers, especially those from non-English-speaking countries, including increased job insecurity. Though the paper is more focused on the Australian economy, many of the lessons do apply to the United States and are certainly impactful in regards to the job securities of foreign workers facing culture shock; since foreign workers by definition do not have permanent residency status, they and the companies they work for generally face scores more scrutinization (Zeidner, 2009). Furthermore, when this oversight is compounded with the general job stressors foreign workers have due to being in a new work environment (i.e., culture shock), there is a

high level of job insecurity as well, which leads to greater mental stress as well as fatigue and fear about the future. As discussed earlier, these issues continue to cycle back into overall work inefficiency and unproductivity. Soylu (2007) confirms this by stating, “The effect of foreign employee status on perceived stress is fully mediated by residential insecurity, job insecurity, local social networks, role ambiguity, and perceived discrimination.” The argument here is quite logical because it asserts that key factors including job insecurity strongly influence foreign workers, which is strongly associated with culture shock. When foreign workers become exposed to entirely new environments and are forced to adapt quickly to unfamiliar work cultures, job insecurity clearly becomes a major component of their job stressors because they want their opportunities to remain and to have a secure future rather than an unpredictable one.

A final note of importance is that despite some employers’ beliefs that culture shock can be prevented by having similar or identical work environments, it is nearly impossible to do so, specifically because culture shock extends beyond physical or spatial awareness to interpersonal relationships and interactions the employee has with other employees, their employer, and customers as well. Costa and Goodkin (n.d.) discussed how, in addition to modifying one’s surroundings to make them more similar to their previous workplaces, it is beneficial to become more educated on social customs in the new environment, as well as modify eating habits to match more with the new culture and become more aware of current events. All of these measures, though limited in that they cannot truly encompass all psychosomatic factors that may be involved in a case of culture shock, do have the implication that they can minimize detrimental psychological effects like fatigue and stress to some extent in foreign workers, which in turn can help reduce overworking.

It is evident that culture shock is largely responsible for inducing or exacerbating numerous factors that cause foreign workers to become overworked, including via fatigue, fears of visa status, and job insecurity. The negative psychological impacts associated with culture shock can heavily impact newly transferred workers who have to navigate a completely new setting with different interpersonal relationships and customs. It is important that the issue of culture shock for foreign workers is solved in a timely fashion, because workers who are not relieved of this disorder may suffer from lasting psychosomatic impacts that impede their ability to work productively and efficiently.

References

Allen Smith, J. (2019, August 16). Helping Expatriate Employees Deal with Culture Shock.

Retrieved from

<https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/summer2019/pages/helping-expatriate-employees-deal-with-culture-shock.aspx>

Avery, D. R., Tonidandel, S., Volpone, S. D., & Raghuram, A. (2010). Overworked in America?

Journal of Managerial Psychology, 25(2), 133-147. doi:10.1108/02683941011019348

Cilluffo, A. & D. Cohn (2017, April 27). 10 demographic trends shaping the U.S. and the world in 2017. *Pew Research Center*.

Costa, H. & K. Goodkin (n.d.). "Culture Shock." *Glimpse*. Retrieved from

https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/EC113DA5-BC43-0135-9E8DAE1003FAFFF2/glimpse_culture_shock_guide.pdf

Dooley, B., & Yamamitsu, E. (2019, June 18). In Japan, It's a Riveting TV Plot: Can a Worker Go Home on Time? Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/business/japan-work-overtime-tv-show.html>

Gordon, J. S. (2019, March 01). Living in fear of deportation is terrible for your health.

Retrieved from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/living-in-fear-as-a-refugee-in-the-u-s-is-terrible-for-your-health/>

Foreign-born workers made up 17.4 percent of labor force in 2019. (2020, May 29). Retrieved from

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/foreign-born-workers-made-up-17-point-4-percent-of-labor-force-in-2019.htm>

Jain, N., (2018, August 24). The case for immigration reform. Retrieved from

<https://www.todayshospitalist.com/the-case-for-immigration-reform/>

Liu, X., Bowe, S. J., Li, L., Too, L. S., & Lamontagne, A. D. (2020). Psychosocial job characteristics and mental health: Do associations differ by migrant status in an Australian working population sample? *Plos One*, 15(11).
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.024290

Mathema, S. (2019). Immigrant Doctors Can Help Lower Physician Shortages in Rural America. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2019/07/29/472619/immigrant-doctors-can-help-lower-physician-shortages-rural-america/>

Oberg, K. (1954). Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment to New Cultural Environments. Retrieved from
http://spartanhistory.kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/6/32/6-20-90F-116-UA2-9-5-5_001301.pdf

Ricci, J. A., Chee, E., Lorandean, A. L., & Berger, J. (2007). Fatigue in the U.S. Workforce: Prevalence and Implications for Lost Productive Work Time. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 49(1), 1-10. doi:10.1097/01.jom.0000249782.60321.2a

Soylu, A. (2007). Foreigners and Workplace Stress. *Journal of Individual Employment Rights*, 12(4), 313-327. doi:10.2190/ie.12.4.d

Thompson, D. (2019, February 24). Workism Is Making Americans Miserable. *The Atlantic*.

Zeidner, R. (2018, April 11). Does the United States Need Foreign Workers? Retrieved from
<https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0609zeidner.aspx>