Child Development: A Hinge in Crossing Culture with a Healthy Self-Esteem

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Does a child’s psychological development determine how successfully he/she will cross cultures later on in life? Certainly it does, even though it is not the sole determining factor. In this short article, I will contend that child development is one of the major factors contributing to a cross-cultural workers ability to cross cultures well. In so doing, I would like to highlight that the process of uprooting a person from one’s home country and familiar support system, leaves a person feeling extremely insecure. With the additional difficulty of language acquisition and dealing with culture shock, the whole process shakes a person to the core. And it is precisely the challenge to one’s identity and worth that makes self-esteem such an important variable in being able to handle the changes and adjustments required in crossing cultures.

One’s upbringing and parental-child relationship can exert a positive or harmful impact on a person’s self-esteem, which in turn will affect the degree to which one can cope with cross-cultural stress. In the end, I will propose a biblical way to re-establish one’s self-esteem in order to cross cultures healthily.

Introduction - Out of the Womb

“Going to the field is an out of womb experience [italics mine] for most first-term missionaries. They have left the support system of family, friends, and church for an unknown, often hostile, environment” (Jones 1995, 30). While cross-cultural workers are being separated and uprooted from the support system they have had been used to thus far in their lives, they must simultaneously adjust to living in a different culture with an unfamiliar worldview and norms of behaviors. They will have to work on establishing a new social network in a culturally appropriate manner. At the same time, in most cases cross-cultural workers also have to adjust to different living standards and to learn access to new social resources. All of these changes are akin to a baby coming out of a warm and protected womb to a

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totally new world, grasping for something to hold onto with their tiny fingers.

Francis White and Elaine Nesbit point out that crossing cultures is a process of psychological adjustment involving changes due to separation and loss. The cross-cultural worker may go through several major psychological stages.

1. Denial: Some may try to minimize the loss by writing often and promising to return home, and so on. Wherever they go, they admire the scenery and people of the host culture as if on a tour.

2. Anger: They may express their anxiety in impatience, gruffness, silence, or criticism, especially with friends and family. Sometimes, they feel

3. Sadness: They may become depressed and will go through grieving, “[coming] to grips with the reality and significance of a loss” (O’Donnell and O’Donnell 1988, 410). It is not until they reach the psychological stage of 4.

Resolution in accepting the loss that they will start to integrate the new situation into their present lives. In experiencing the four stages of grief, however, the lives of cross-cultural workers can be are enriched, giving them far more to offer to others (Ibid., 409-411). The one condition for such a positive outcome is that the cross-cultural worker was able to overcome any egative impact from the out of the womb experience to their self-esteem.

The Possible Negative Impact of the Out of the Womb Experience On a Cross-Cultural Worker’s Self-Esteem

Besides the experience of separation and loss, cross-cultural workers undergo culture shock as well. Duane Elmer gives a very simple but excellent description of culture shock. “Culture shock is when you experience frustration from not knowing the rules or having the skills for adjusting to a new culture... [It makes] us vulnerable to embarrassment, mistakes and even danger” [italics mine] (Elmer 2002, 44). This sense of frustration is compounded by a sense of loss from being uprooted and a sense of impotence (Ronald Taft as quoted in Gudykunst 2003, 377). The sense of loss and impotence, in turn, can lead to psychosomatic symptoms if maladjustment continues.

In the process of separation and bonding, as well as cultural adjustment, we often encounter behaviors and words other than what we expected. Some of the immature responses Duane Elmer lists are: outbursts of anger, resentment, negativity, fear, and pent-up irritations (Elmer 2002, 55). We must find out the reason behind our responses. Otherwise, our ministries will be negatively affected. Moreover, a cross-cultural worker’s psychological, social and spiritual well-being could be so negatively impacted that the result could be burn out.

Moreover, crossing cultures often involves learning a new language. When adult cross-cultural workers start learning to count “1-2-3,” call “daddy” and “mommy,” name colors and so on -- it brings the workers back to their infancy and stymies the workers’ intellectual growth. The limitations on communication in a foreign language can make daily activities stressful and
heighten one’s sense of insecurity. The frustration of being unable to accomplish even daily chores in an unfamiliar environment further depletes one’s emotional energy. The repeated experiences and sense of failure can contribute to the diminishing of self-esteem, especially for those who are shy and are afraid to make mistakes.

Besides grammar, culture is ingrained in language. Therefore, culture shock occurs in the process of language acquisition, when the learners encounter concepts that are absent or contradictory to their original culture. The cross-cultural workers have to start their socialization as children again. The disorientation in the socialization process will further reduce the cross-cultural workers' self-esteem. In summary, crossing cultures is an experience that will very likely lead to a crisis of self-esteem, shaking the person to the core.

Impact of Difficult Child Development on Self-Esteem

The question is why do some workers struggle so much with self-esteem under cross-cultural duress, while others not so much? Why are some cross-cultural workers resilient when the core of their self-esteem is shaken? And why do some just crumble under the impact of crossing cultures? It is because each person’s upbringing is unique. In the process of child development, each child may have encountered good facilitation of growth or obstacles at various stages in their psychological development. When a child’s psychological development is well established, his/her self-esteem will not be impacted as negatively by the out of womb experience. Such adults will be able to adjust to their new cultures and environments with a more resilient self-esteem.

Tasks and Difficulties in a Child’s Psychological Development

Below is an appendix that I developed in my dissertation, “Person-formation of Chinese Cross-Cultural Missionaries from Hong Kong” (Cheng 2001, 340). It summarizes the developmental tasks in children’s development, their timing and the results of frustrated development.

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1 To develop this table, I have combined the writings of three authors. Two chapters, one called “Understanding Human Development” in Groeschel’s Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development and another chapter called “Contemporary Psychoanalytic Theory” in Theories of Personality by Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, have been cross-referenced. Both chapters are based on the developmental psychology theory of the famous psychologist, Erik Erikson. It summarizes the developmental tasks of a child’s development and what will happen when the development is frustrated.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Developmental Tasks</th>
<th>Difficult Development Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Later childhood and adolescence</td>
<td>Develop creativity. Learn to be industrious and competent. Develop individuality: a sense of their own identity, who they are in their aptitudes and ideology.</td>
<td>Develop a sense of inferiority. Compensate with over-achievement. Become negative, self-conscious, anxious, confused and unpredictable, and fearful of rejection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early adulthood</td>
<td>Experiment with intimate relationships of many kinds and develop the capacity for intimacy.</td>
<td>Develop inability in intimacy.</td>
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**Common Damaged Emotions**

From the table above, we see that any frustrated child developmental task leads to a negative impact on a child. Eventually, what will be the lasting negative emotional impact on adults who have experienced frustrated development? Of course, each person is unique and there is no simple answer to this question. Here, I would like to list commonly seen damaged emotions as depicted by David Seamands in his *Healing for Damaged Emotions*. They are: A. sense of unworthiness, B. perfectionist complex, C. supersensitivity, and D. depression (Cheng 2001, 71-73). Quoting directly from my dissertation, I offer the following descriptions of each emotion.

A. **Sense of Unworthiness**: This sense of unworthiness is “a continuous [deep] feeling of anxiety, inadequacy, and inferiority” (Seamands 1981:14). Persons with such a sense of unworthiness do not believe that they are worthy as a person. Moreover, they do not think they are worthy of anyone else’s care for them either. This sense of unworthiness not only affects their own self-esteem and social relationships, it also penetrates into their relationship with God and faith in Him. They have a hard time personally receiving God’s love and forgiveness for them.

B. **Perfectionist Complex**: According to Seamands, the perfectionist complex is: The inner feeling that says, ‘I can never quite achieve. I never do anything well enough. I can’t please myself, others, or God.’ This kind of a person is always groping, striving, usually feeling guilty, driven by inner oughts and shoulds. ‘I ought to be able to do this. I should be able to do that. I must be a little bit better.’ He’s ever climbing, but never reaching (1981:14–15).

Seamands expands this complex in his book entitled *Healing Grace*. He explains that people who have developed a false super-self always have to perform in order to fulfill themselves. However, they have a hard time relating to God, to people, and even to themselves. Such persons will not be satisfied with their own achievements and are constantly trying to prove themselves to gain approval (1988:97–99). Their hearts do not know grace.

At this point, I would like to add another dimension to perfectionism. Perfectionism drives people to achieve even at the cost of extinguishing themselves. Not only does the inner drive exact a toll on their lives but it impacts and can overrun the life of those who work with them. But when [perfectionists] are confronted with their problem, they feel threatened because [their dream of being perfect colleagues is shattered]. Therefore, perfectionism has the power to drive people to “workaholism,” to blind people to the reality threatening their
self-image, and to cause them to sacrifice social relationships for tasks.

C. Supersensitivity: Supersensitive people have usually experienced deep emotional hurt when they reached out for affection. They “need a lot of approval” (Seamands 1981:17). Their need for approval is so intense that they may “read” even unintended disapproval and negligence as personal affronts. Some supersensitive people, however, cover their sensitivity by “being hard, tough . . . [and even] pushing people around, hurting, and dominating them” (1981:17).

D. Depression: Another very common emotional problem among adults is depression. Seamands identifies biological disposition, learned-feeling concepts, and the temperament of a person as contributing factors to depression. “Depression is related to personality structure, physical makeup, body chemistry, glandular functions, emotional patterns, and learned-feeling concepts” (1981:129). By nature and temperament, some people are nervous, apprehensive, or easily frightened. They are supersensitive and their feelings are easily touched and changed. . . . People who are extremely introspective and sensitive often have the worst problems with depression (1981:130).

Seamands also makes two interesting and important points about depression. They are acceptance of the prone-to-depression self and the relation between depression and spiritual warfare. Rejection of one’s own temperament and not accepting oneself aggravates depression in a person. Satan will also try “to turn temperamental depression into spiritual depression . . . emotional depression into spiritual defeat . . . burned-out emotion . . . into a burned-out trust” (1981:131).

These commonly developed damaged emotions last not only in a person’s childhood, but they stubbornly persist into adulthood without much of the person’s awareness. Therefore, cross-cultural workers should review their own childhood development. It will enable them to realize what damaged emotions they have been carrying in their lives and what the causes were. Hopefully, we can even facilitate the healing before they enter into the “out-of-womb” experience. Let us look at what possible causes of frustrated child development could be.

**Causes of Frustrated Child Development and Damaged Emotions**

Cross-cultural workers cannot simply remove their damaged emotions without having received healing from their difficult childhood development and devastated self-esteem. We must ask the question, “What caused a certain childhood developmental task to be frustrated?” While some children encounter sinful
abuse and trauma at certain stages of their development, some experience a lack of support or negligence from their parents.

**A. Traumatic Experiences in Childhood Development.**
Below is a list of eight illustrations of possible traumatic life experiences that I am quoting from my dissertation.
1. Recurring, disturbing mental pictures, scenes, or dreams
2. Hurt from being rejected, abandoned, and unwanted [by significant adults in the child’s life, especially by parents].
4. Frightening experiences [including growing in a war zone], unhealthy teachings, and poor relationships [especially from parents or parental roles] in the past that lead to various kinds of fear.
5. Abuses: physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual.
6. Unfulfilled, lack of certain emotional needs: lack of love, acceptance, affirmation, and intimacy.
7. Parental inversion [Instead of being taken care by parents, the child is made to take care of the parents].
8. In utero encounters: damaged emotions resulted from any persistent strong negative feelings from or through the mother from what she was going through (Cheng 2001, 76).

**B. Parental Relationship.**
Nevertheless, the key to a child’s emotional wholeness is parental relationship. When I was writing my dissertation, I found Charles Kraft’s description of some problematic parental relationship, in his *Deep Wounds, Deep Healing*. David Seamands’ *Putting Away Your Childish Things* further explains the above scenarios. If abandonment, conditional love and perfectionism are inflicted from the parents to the children in their development, it will greatly damage the child’s self-esteem.

One may have the issue of abandonment if the parent(s) were unavailable or absent. Someone with the issue of rejection could have had parents who were too quick or too frequent in their correction. Or, the parents might not have wanted the child. A person may suffer from fear or a sense of insecurity if he or she has family members who were unpredictable and erupted in anger. Or, if the person was pressurized by parents to conform, he or she could turn rebellious. (Kraft 1993:184–187 as quoted in Cheng 2001, 73-74)

“If a child is raised in a family with parents who interact with conditional love and conditional relationships, the child will try very hard to gain acceptance and love. The child may then develop a motto of ‘measure up!’ (perfectionism)” (Seamands 1982, 32). “Such inner children in adults can be emotionally destructive in that they may “feel shame or guilt about nearly everything they do and even for who they are” (Kraft 1993, 185). If a cross-cultural worker encountered the
difficulties depicted above in their childhood psychological development, the stress and shock of crossing cultures will aggravate his/her damaged emotions and self-esteem.

**Re-establishment of Self Esteem for a Healthy Adjustment from the Out of the Womb Experience**

Therefore, cross-cultural workers must uphold their self-worth with a biblical self-esteem both for their own emotional wholeness and in order to be healthy workers for God’s kingdom. A biblical self-esteem is so vital in the process of undergoing culture shock and adjusting to cultural change.

**On Defining “Self-Esteem”**

Before we examine what is biblical self-esteem, it would be appropriate to first define the term “self-esteem”. I would like to cite Ray Anderson’s *Self Care*, in which he defines self-esteem succinctly as “...an affective sense of accepting one’s self and feeling self-worth” (2010, 97). Accepting one’s self requires a self-concept, that is, an awareness of who we see ourselves to be. In turn, a sense of self-worth is contingent upon a sense of self-respect. Therefore, 1. self-concept, 2. self-respect and ultimately 3. self-worth are the basic components of self-esteem (*Ibid.*, 97-98). In addition to these basic components, biblical and social perspectives to a person’s self-esteem contribute to a holistic sense of self-esteem.

**Biblical Dimension of Self-esteem**

Ray Anderson points out that a biblical self-esteem recognizes “the self has intrinsic value to God” (2010, 104). He calls this biblical self-esteem “positive self-esteem.” “The recovery of the image of God as the intrinsic value of the original self, resulting in positive self-esteem as empowerment for feelings of self-worth, has its source in divine love and grace” (*Ibid.*, 104). With Anderson’s definition of self-esteem, it tells us who we are and enables us to respect ourselves with intrinsic worth from God.

When God creates us, he bestows his image in us. God values and esteems us so much that He even gave us His Son. Your existence is the design of God. He designed you even before you came to being in your mother’s womb. Your existence is not an accident. He wants you. “You created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb... All the days ordained for me were written in your book...” (Psalm 139: 15, NIV).

If we find our self-esteem in our original identity as royal beings with the image of God in us and understand that we are worthy of Christ’s laying down his own life, we respect our identity in God. God loves and accepts us not because of who we are, but because of the heavenly Father’s love and because of Christ’s atonement. We then esteem ourselves with the same esteem that God has for us. Our biblical self-esteem and self-worth, therefore, are based on the worth the Father himself bestows us in Christ.

**Social Dimension of Self-Esteem**

Moreover, by acknowledging our God-given intrinsic value, we “can freely acknowledge [our] own value and value to God and others” (Anderson *Ibid.*, 116). From Anderson, we see that self-esteem actually is a three dimensional relationship: with God, with self and with...
others. Kristjan Kristjansson also points out that self-esteem is not merely a self-concept. Self-esteem is tied to the emotions of pride and shame as one perceives one’s self-worth (2010, 126). Self-worth *per se* is understood in the context of relationships. Therefore, there is a social dimension to self-esteem as well.

Let me elucidate further by tracing how God actually ordains that children learn God’s intrinsically bestowed self-esteem from their parents. To children, parents are mighty figures. Children’s sense of intrinsic self-esteem is established through their parents’ unconditional love and acceptance. If, however, children are deprived of such parental love and nurture, they lack a sense security in their early development, which they keep searching for even in adulthood. Their sense of self-worth comes to depend on others and they become vulnerable to a negative self-image. They often try to recover their self-esteem by self-effort and by gaining esteem from people. Unfortunately, they never attain their goal because the biblical basis for self-esteem does not come from others. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8, NIV). Just as salvation does not come from us, neither should our self-esteem be based on our own performance, for our self-esteem can only ultimately come from God. Even kingdom workers, however, when they cross cultures may still rely on the wrong means in search of their self-significance.

**Re-establishment of Self-Esteem**

As we have been discussing, not all cross-cultural workers necessarily enter cross-cultural settings with a wholesome self-esteem, and the cross cultural experience only magnifies some of our damaged emotions. Therefore cross-cultural workers must be honest and courageous to take a hard look at themselves when reacting to a new environment and pay attention to intense emotional reactions (sudden anger, depression, and so on) or abrupt behaviors. Below are some suggestions I would propose.

**A. Hard questions to ask ourselves.**

“Am I experiencing a crisis with respect to my self-esteem? Why do I feel the way I feel? Why am I so exhausted in my inner-being?” It may be helpful to recall what happened in each stage of our psychological development. Let us honestly ask ourselves, “Have I been carrying any damaged emotions in my life?” “Do I have a biblically based self-esteem? Or, do I allow my damaged emotions and damaged self-esteem to distort the biblical truth about who I am?”

**B. Responsibility for seeking healing from the past.** As adults and as cross-cultural workers, is it too late for us as adults who are already in crossing cultural work, to seek healing from the past? No, it is never too late for a person to re-establish their self-esteem. What happened to us in the past does not ultimately determine our present lives. It is how we respond to what happened that matters the most. “Although people with damaged emotions usually did not cause
their own damaged emotions, they are still responsible if they allow ‘the inner child of [their] past to dominate [their lives]’ (Cheng 2001, 75).

In my case study of six Hong Kong women missionaries, I found that those who sought healing for their emotional wounds scored the best results in their lives in cross-cultural ministry. Those who denied or ignored their wounds scored the lowest (Ibid., 213-214)! In fact, as adults and as cross-cultural workers, we have the responsibility to actively seek healing from the past and build a healthy self-esteem. What can we do to restore emotional wholeness in our lives?

C. Actions to heal frustrated child Development.

Prayers and meditation: Pray that the Spirit helps us to be aware when we fall into traps opened up by damaged emotions and a distorted self-esteem. Let us ask God to show us the root causes of past devastations and to enable us to forgive those who inflicted such damage on us. At the same time, let us take up our responsibility as adults to renounce and repent of the fact that we allowed ourselves to react out of the hurt and damage from the past. Then ask the Holy Spirit for help to replace our damaged self-esteem with a biblical self-esteem. To develop a healthier self-esteem, take time to prayerfully meditate on the Word of God, especially on those passages in which God speaks tenderly about his esteem for us. In addition, enrich your lives with teachings on biblical self-esteem and inner-healing by godly authors. Soak yourselves in prayers and in meditation to transform the affective faculty of your inner-being. Rest in the self-worth that God has bestowed upon you.

Seeking counseling and inner-healing: It takes practice to completely rest in God’s bestowed self-worth. Since there is also a social dimension to self-esteem, it is not advisable for cross-cultural workers to seek transformation in their self-esteem solo or by themselves. We should also seek support from others. Therefore, if you are in an environment that can offer you counseling and inner-healing ministry, please take advantage of it to facilitate the re-establishment of a biblical self-esteem.

Getting prayer and emotional support: Confide in your supervisor and some trustworthy prayer partners that you need their spiritual and emotional support. It is not shameful that you were inflicted by a frustrated childhood development. But it will be a shame if you do not seek recovery by getting support from others. You, yourself, also want to be gentle and supportive of yourself as well.

Conclusion

In this article, we see that child development is a key factor to crossing cultures with a healthy self-esteem. Crossing cultures is like an out of womb experience that can lead to a self-esteem crisis. If any of the stages of development psychologically are frustrated, the self-beings by the work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, such breakthrough can never be achieved by professional counseling. Still, professional counseling can facilitate and stabilize the transformation in the healing of the inner beings.

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2 “Inner-healing ministry” is also called “prayer counseling” sometimes. The “counseling” that I refer to, here, is conducted by professional psychologists. Meanwhile, “inner-healing ministry” is administered by Christians who are gifted in ministering to people who seek breakthroughs in the healing of their inner
esteem will likely sustain a negative impact that in turn can pose damaging later in life both to the cross-cultural worker and to his or her ministry. The adult cross-cultural worker bears the responsibility of seeking healing from the emotional devastation of the past, if there was any.

The success of a person crossing cultures with a healthy self-esteem, however, is not determined by a person’s past. Rather, it is determined by one’s own determination to redeem any difficulty in their childhood development. By establishing a biblical self-esteem, a cross-cultural worker is able to live as a child esteemed by God and as a new creation. Their inner being is an unspoken witness of the Life in them to others. They can also enable others to be the same in God.

Cited References
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