

Cultural Chameleons Blend in by Showing True Colors

by Winston Sieck - May 20, 2012

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Some people know a lot about a single foreign culture. They have lived in the region for a significant period, become fluent in the language, and developed a nuanced understanding about how the society works.

These regional experts have made a [second cultural home](#) for themselves.

There are others who find themselves flung into numerous foreign lands, and who thrive no matter what the location of their latest sojourn. These “cultural chameleons” appear to have a natural ability to effortlessly make sense of and [adjust to their new social environment](#).

How do the cultural chameleons do it? Are they acting on traits they were luck enough to be born with? Or have they acquired skills that anyone can learn?

Louise Rasmussen and Winston Sieck of Global Cognition completed a study on cultural chameleons. The researchers wanted to know how they blend in so well. Rasmussen presented their findings at the Society for Applied Anthropology’s 2012 conference held in Baltimore, MD.

Cultural chameleons are especially efficient and resourceful in how they [learn and deal with cultural challenges](#). For example, many people seem to think you need to be fully fluent in the language before you can really learn about the culture. It’s a nice ideal, but for shorter sojourns it seems to be more practical to learn several little things.

Rasmussen and Sieck found that cultural chameleons tend to learn scraps of the language, history, and other facts prior to departure. They then use those facts to show their interest in the culture. This helps them to build social relationships, which then opens avenues for further learning.

Rasmussen and her team conducted dozens of cognitive interviews with Americans who had high [cross-cultural competence](#). These cultural chameleons had a track record of rapidly attaining proficiency in a variety of new cultures. The researchers were not asking about opinions. Instead, they collected in-depth accounts of experiences interacting with people overseas. The team distilled common strategies shared among the cultural chameleons.

The findings suggest that cultural intelligence is not strongly associated with a certain personality type, such as extroversion. Instead, there are teachable practices that enable anyone to engage in constructive behaviors in foreign cultures.

These cultural chameleons are not all trying to learn the same things according to some theory about what’s important. Instead, the research indicated that the those high in [cultural intelligence](#) tend to follow their own personal interests when delving into a new culture for the first time.

Whether that interest is art, language, history, religion, technology, or sports seems to matter less than the topic being of real interest to the sojourner. The personal interest likely makes it easier to get started learning something about the culture. Bringing up these kinds of things with host-nationals also tends to lead to more genuine conversations.

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