

## CHANGING PLACES IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD - INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

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### Abstract

Intercultural awareness has become a crucial element in professional communication in general and business negotiation, in particular. From this perspective, although a study on David Lodge's *Changing Places* could be perceived as hardly anything more but a return to the past (the book was written in 1975), it may also be seen as an insight into the intercultural issues related to the academic world and beyond. Apparently obsolete, the novel opens a gate to a world in which individuals are constantly exposed to the need of "changing places". Nowadays, either private or public sector actors, we are all, to a certain extent, faced with the possibility of dealing with a different culture. For these reasons, a look into Lodge's novel could be both a pleasant and useful initiative especially for the young reader who will, undoubtedly, enjoy the experience. The aim of this paper is to explore the tips in David Lodge's above mentioned novel as well as the extent to which they can be used in today's globalized world in order to achieve successful intercultural communication, primarily addressing those interested in the process of intercultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** communication, cultural metaphors, culture, intercultural exchange.

### CHANGING PLACES - KEY INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

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David Lodge's 1975 novel revolves around the British/American experience of two University professors, Phillip Swallow and Morris Zapp, who, willingly or not, end up in the middle of an academic exchange between two universities (the University of Rummidge, UK and Euphoria, US - the two names are fictional). Consequently, the structure relies on the sharp contrast between two lifestyles, two mentalities, two nations, two educational systems as well as on the masculine-feminine, conservative-anarchist, religious-free thinker dichotomies. The "cultural shock" turns into a prolific ground for Lodge's work since the plot

spurs from it. However, the two's switch turns a lot more complicated since they do not only exchange their University positions but their whole lives for, as the novel unfolds, they will switch their lifestyles, beliefs and finally, wives.

*Changing Places* comprises six chapters, each focused on both the American (Phillip Swallow's) and the British experience (Morris Zapp's). The action is set in January, 1969, when the two are each on a plane heading towards a destination that would provide them with a new perspective on social, professional and family life: Euphoria, US, in Phillip Swallow's case and Rummidge, UK, in Morris Zapp's. The two men are representative for the cultures they come from: Phillip is the product of the British culture where loyalty is more important than competence - although an academic, he has hardly published anything and moreover, he has not managed to identify an area of expertise that would enable his career to develop. However, he is tolerated among his fellow academics since, as a professional, he is hardly uncommon for the British University (at least at that time). Morris Zapp, on the other hand, is ambitious, fully dedicated to the clear purpose of writing an exhaustive critical work on Jane Austen. He is a highly appreciated scholar not only at his home University but also abroad; throughout his career, he has published extensively, being well known by colleagues and students.

Lodge best describes the extent to which the two are representative for the British/ American cultures: they are both typical products of the educational systems they had grown up into. The American graduate is exceptionally well prepared to apply for a job, being just as animated by the free initiative spirit as those working on

the Wall Street. On the other hand, the British graduate is a lonely soul, ignored by the world, insecure, incapable to identify the requirements he is supposed to complete; as a general rule, while competition forms the basis of the American professional system, British universities offer life-long contracts and its employees are paid equally<sup>1</sup>.

To Swallow, despite the fact that the US is a country animated by extreme violence and melodrama, divided by deep racial and ideological disparities, hit by political assassinations, it still remains a piece of Paradise, the only place where he feels free and happy: the warm sun, iced drinks, cheap cigarettes and the endless varieties of ice cream – these are all simple, little things that ensure his happiness and wellbeing. The writer also alludes to the socio-political state of the US at that time – the country was overwhelmed by the incapacity to act in one way or another, its ideas – if any – were inarticulate and everyone was tempted into the “flower power” atmosphere. People were all caught in the realm of sit-ins, teach-ins, love-ins and what the country most lacked in was, paradoxically, action despite the constant strikes which tormented the university campus.

It is this atmosphere that Morris Zapp leaves. In Rumbridge, he becomes familiar with what he calls “the system of public welfare and private misery” – for example, while every academic is given what, at least in Zapp’s opinion, one would call a luxurious office, British homes are cold and poorly equipped.

While Phillip is perplexed at the high divorce rate in the US and finds it hard to understand why, if invited at someone’s place at 8 p.m., people are unpleasantly surprised to see you are on time and not at least thirty minutes late, Morris is incapable to understand and apply the British assessment system and finds it impossible to cope with the British terms’ lack of precision, a variety of language he finds evading and prone to compromise: just like in the weather forecast, there is no “minimum” or “maximum”; everything there (Great Britain) is “moderate”, “normal”, “temperate”<sup>2</sup>.

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## INTERCULTURAL THEORIES AND DAVID LODGE’S CHANGING PLACES

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With all these aspects in mind, it is only natural to associate David Lodge’s novel and its intrinsic cultural issues to Geert Hofstede’s study focused on the influence of culture on the workplace. He identifies five dimensions of national culture: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism*, *masculinity/femininity* and *time orientation*. The *power distance* dimension is very much related to the acceptance of the unequal distribution of power, i.e. the degree to which employees are independent, to the presence of hierarchical structures, accessible bosses and to the idea of progress by evolution or revolution; *uncertainty avoidance* revolves around the degree to which people can take risks, accept conflict and stress and work without rules; the *individualism/collectivism* dimension is centred on the degree to which people work in groups or alone and relate to their task or to their colleagues; finally, the *masculinity/femininity* dimension is about the degree to which people believe in consensus, put work (or, on the other hand, family) at the centre of their lives and expect managers to use intuition<sup>3</sup>. *Time orientation*, i.e. the degree to which members of a culture expect long or short term success, is also one of Hofstede’s dimensions. We will deal with three of these as they occur in David Lodge’s novel: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance* and *masculinity/femininity*.

It is therefore accurate to assume that Lodge’s novel offers the appropriate premises for the analysis of British and American cultures from Geert Hofstede’s perspective. This experience would nevertheless prove both entertaining and useful since access to the academic world as well as insight into the often disregarded similarities and differences between two cultures would thus be granted to anyone who enjoys reading a book.

In terms of *power distance*, Lodge’s novel suggests that while in the US, progress is constantly marked by revolution (Euphoria is under the siege of students who permanently require one thing or another), the only element

which indirectly troubles the peace in Rumbridge is external and, most importantly, American – Morris Zapp. When Gordon Masters resigns from the Head of the English Department position (Rumbridge University), instead of relief, the staff feels insecure in the absence of his harsh authority. Lodge compares them to a ship's crew who, left without their captain, are willing to accept orders from whoever takes the captain's seat. Therefore, hierarchy, unequal distribution of power and employees' dependence on inaccessible bosses (as in the case of the English Department at Rumbridge University) point to the fact that British, unlike Americans, tend towards a high power distance structure.

The *uncertainty avoidance* index is a lot higher in the British case than in the American one, for it turns extremely difficult for people in Rumbridge to function within a violent environment. While "strike" is the word of the day in Euphoria and people all over America are used to violent demonstrations, when students decide to organize a sit-in in Rumbridge, their action is described as similar to the violence in Europe in the 1940s and, ridiculously, a state of war is soon declared. On the other hand, Americans feel relaxed about the demonstrations that animate their everyday life, being aware of the fact that "revolution is evolution".

Finally, in terms of *masculinity and femininity*, we have found that Lodge's novel reveals a predominantly feminine British culture as opposed to the masculine American one. First of all, British are more concerned about family life than Americans. Despite the fact that Phillip Swallow's family makes him feel rather trapped than fulfilled, he rejects the idea of a separation being shocked at the high divorce rate in the States. Morris Zapp, on the other hand, has already been married once and about to divorce from his second wife, Desiree. As David Lodge suggests, Americans are clearly more focused on career development than on family relationships. Not only that professionals like Zapp constantly struggle to specialize and reach higher standards but in the US, women had started to claim their rights more and more vocally and to attempt to develop professionally despite facing the risk of

family failure. Of course, the book was written in 1975. Since then, Feminism has managed to reach most of its targets and women's presence in all professional fields is no longer a purpose. However, the fact that American culture is a masculine one is still valid.

In support of this idea we shall further turn towards Martin Gannon's extremely interesting work: *Cultural Metaphors: Applications and Exercises*. By using as a premise Hofstede's survey according to which, among the cultures considered (Germany, Sweden, England, Australia, U.S. Italy, India, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Arab Nations), the British and American ones seem quite similar, Gannon states that although "the scores and rank orderings of some countries such as England and the U.S. are very similar, (...) practical experience suggests that there are vast differences between them"<sup>4</sup>. For example, although both countries rank as individualistic, Gannon states that their individualism is different; the metaphor he uses for British individualism is a *traditional British house* while the one used to describe American individualism is *American football* (competitive individualism). The British culture is, in this case, like a house: traditional, with strong foundations and a rather rigid. On the other hand, American football is representative for the American culture: although a team game, it is highly individualistic (although sharing a common purpose, team players seem to compete against each other in order to reach it), characterized by short periods of extreme violence and unpredictable outcomes. Huddling is an essential act in American football – it brings people (from different backgrounds and with different abilities) together to solve short-term problems<sup>5</sup>.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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This paper is meant to demonstrate that David Lodge's 1975 novel encompasses some key aspects of the British and American cultures which, beyond good quality humour, prove quite useful to both students and young professionals involved in intercultural exchanges

who have, to a great extent and due to various reasons, lost their passion for reading.

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### Endnotes

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5. Idem, p. 67.