Culture Shock

What is it?

Culture shock is a psychological/emotional reaction that happens to anyone who travels far from home and is suddenly in a totally new and foreign environment. You may think that it couldn’t happen to you because you’ve traveled before or because you don’t normally fall prey to emotional reactions, but it is an almost unavoidable reaction that happens when you go to live somewhere else for a while, so it’s best to be prepared.

Culture shock happens whenever you are confronted with a new environment and with different approaches and philosophies to everyday living. These differences cannot be ignored when you are confronted with them on a daily basis, and therefore they become your main focus.

Normally culture shock follows a bell curve – or sometimes a ‘W’-shaped curve - that encompasses five or more separate phases: fun, fright, flight, fight and fun.

Fun - When you first arrive overseas everything will seem new and exciting. The locals will seem like wonderful people, and the environment beautiful and mystical. You’ll probably be very excited just to finally be there after all your preparations.

Fright - After a while, however – maybe a few days, or a few weeks – all the new people, customs and places might begin to become annoying and depressing. You may begin to think thoughts such as how much better your own culture is, or how much friendlier Americans are. You will begin to miss your family and friends. This is the ‘fright’ stage.

Flight - You might level off for a while at this point and think that you’ve gotten over your culture shock. That’s when it usually starts to get even worse. You begin to feel really homesick. You can’t find anything you need and you hate everything about your new environment. Why are they laughing all the time anyway? Why do they talk so fast? Maybe you might have heard one or two anti-American remarks made by now. How dare they insult your country!

You will suddenly become the most patriotic American to have ever lived, and you will be convinced that if you could only get back home everything would be fine. This is the ‘flight’ stage. Do not leave during this stage or you may never venture abroad again! And be aware that these are only stages that you have to pass through before you can get to the next one.

Fight - Once you get to the very bottom and want desperately to leave your host country because you hate, hate it (and we are talking about the worst-case scenario here – not everyone gets this depressed), you will probably start to notice that it’s not all that bad. You might give yourself a little pep talk at this stage and perhaps join a club or society just to make yourself feel better. Maybe a night at the pub or cafe would help too. Perhaps you start to meet new people and get to know them a little. Your confidence starts to build, and you find that you begin muttering out loud when you get to the post office only to find that it’s closed for lunch. This is the ‘fight’ stage.

Fun - Finally you begin to ‘become’ one of the locals and you start doing things their way. You learn all the routines, get to know the good places to go for cheap food, become friendly with the shop clerk down the road and understand what some of the slang actually means. You begin to feel part of your community and you begin to forge some really strong friendships. Come the end of your visit, you find that you desperately don’t want to leave.

So that’s what culture shock is in a nutshell. Some people are more seriously affected by it than others. It usually depends on how adaptable you are. If you can be flexible and tolerant of behavior different from your own, you will probably only experience mild culture shock. If you insist that everything must be American or done the way you’ve always done it, you will most likely experience strong culture shock.

What are the symptoms of culture shock?

Sometimes it’s difficult to spot culture shock, and people often don’t realize that they are suffering from it. Symptoms will vary, and you may experience one or more of the following:
- homesickness
- boredom
- withdrawal (spending too much time alone)
- negative feelings and stereotyping of nationals
- loss of concentration
- excessive sleep or insomnia
- compulsive eating or drinking
- lack of appetite
- irritability
- crying uncontrollably or outbursts of anger
- physical ailments such as frequent headaches or stomachaches

How to cope with culture shock

With typical culture shock it’s never the big changes that affect people so much as the little ones. When it becomes a chore just to find a spool of thread and a needle so that you can sew a button back on your shirt, that’s when the tension can build into raging anger or desperate anguish. Here are some ways to deal with culture shock when it hits, and some thoughts about how culture shock can help to improve us in the long run:

➢ First of all, know that you WILL experience culture shock and that it WILL pass eventually. Just get used to the idea now.
➢ Before you even leave, purchase a country guidebook and start reading about where you will be living/studying!
➢ Start reading online newspapers from the city where you will be studying.
➢ Utilize the IP Office website (www.etown.edu/oip) for resources that will help you prepare for differences.
➢ Expect things to be different overseas. You may be prepared for the big differences, but you may be quite surprised at the smaller ones. Expect the unexpected.
➢ Don’t become judgmental about these differences. Don’t start comparing everything with America or with your home. Try to view the new culture objectively, and ask yourself why these differences exist.
➢ Maintain a sense of humor and laugh at yourself when you make mistakes, as you are bound to do. Allow yourself some time to learn about the new culture and don’t pressure yourself to be perfect from the start. Remember that you are free to choose not to fit in at times too. You don’t have to go along with every new approach you come across, and you are free to pick and choose.
➢ Avoid reacting emotionally every time you feel frustrated or frightened by something different. Culture shock happens because unconsciously we expect everyone to be like us. When we discover that this isn’t the case, we tend to become confused and feel threatened. But instead of reacting emotionally, the best remedy is to stand back from the experience and focus on the cause of your reaction. By making yourself conscious of what is causing you to feel the way you do, you will help yourself to understand yourself better and to understand the new culture as well.
➢ Become aware of how your reactions are typically ‘American’. Observe how other international students react to the new culture and note how this is different from your own reaction. In doing this, you will learn more about yourself and what makes you American. You will also gain a fresh perspective on what it means to be American in the wider context of a global culture.
➢ Talk to your colleagues on the trip and to anyone else who you trust. Remember that everyone who came over with you will be experiencing culture shock along with you, so take heart from knowing that you aren’t alone.

What are some things which are likely to cause culture shock?

Everyone will be affected differently, but here are some of the differences in other cultures that may cause you some difficulty, frustration or despair when you first arrive:

➢ Amenities don’t stay open as long as amenities in the US. Most services shut on Sundays, and some close for lunch or tea or afternoon siesta.
➢ You won’t be able to get certain foods you enjoy, and soft drinks are often served without ice.
➢ Pubs and bars may close as early as eleven.
➢ The locals speak so fast sometimes that you can’t understand them even if they are speaking English.
Elizabethtown College

International Programs

- Relationships between local men and women may be much more traditional and conservative than in the US. Women in some countries can often be treated more like they were 20 or 30 years ago in the US. Expect to experience prejudice, but don’t get upset (see the section on ‘Sexual Differences’). Laugh off chauvinistic remarks, and be ready with a stingingly clever reply if necessary.
- Locals may have a tendency to use terms of endearment with complete strangers, so expect to be called things like ‘love’ and ‘darlin’. Women will at times be called ‘lads’ in Ireland, or unpleasant terms in other countries.
- There aren’t so many rules and regulations relating to sexual harassment abroad, so don’t be surprised if you occasionally find men and women behaving in ways you feel are inappropriate. Remember that you are there to observe and learn, not to judge and correct. If you feel upset over something of this nature, talk to one of your host institution staff members or to the Elizabethtown College faculty member.
- One of the surest ways to tell that you have been accepted into a local culture is when the locals start insulting you and ‘slagging off Americans’ in a humorous way. Don’t get offended, join in. Remind them about Hollywood, baseball, Baskin Robbins. This is far less likely to happen now anyway with the new political climate in the US.
- Be prepared to hear many words that are considered unacceptable or inappropriate in the US. Get used to it and get over it.

Reverse Culture Shock

But wait! That’s not all! Just when you thought it was safe…you will experience culture shock all over again when you return to the States. In fact, reverse culture shock, as it’s known, is sometimes more difficult to cope with than the original version. The longer you are away, the stronger it will hit you and the longer it will take to go through the various stages.

Most students complain that when they return to the States, no one seems particularly interested in what they did overseas. People don’t understand your jokes, they’re not interested in trying the new foods you’ve discovered, they don’t want to hear about foreign TV, and they don’t want to listen to native music. They particularly won’t want to look at your 450 photos of your host family either.

You may have a feeling of detachment – of not belonging anywhere for a while. You may find it particularly difficult to fit back in to your classes. Those who are under 21 may find it difficult to no longer be allowed to drink legally.

There are many things you can do to help ease the effects of reverse culture shock. Probably the best thing is to stay in touch with your travel mates. Stay in touch with overseas friends as well by e-mail. Come talk to staff in the CGC about your experiences who never tire of hearing about what you got up to. Have a theme night with your study abroad friends where you fix food from your host country and listen to the music you brought back. You could even invite any international students who are at Elizabethtown College from your host country to join you.

Remember that it will pass, no matter how much you think it won’t, but also remember that you will never be the same person you were before you left. You will be part of what’s called the ‘Third Culture,’ which is made up of those people who have lived abroad and have come back home. Once you do this, you are never quite the same again. Seek out others like yourself, and you’ll be fine.

Racial and sexual issues abroad

Racial issues

In addition to culture shock, students may experience greater acceptance abroad or perhaps encounter discrimination or even racism. While Elizabethtown College does not tolerate discrimination or racism on the part of the host institutions, whether and to what extent students have such experiences in their dealing with society at large will vary greatly depending on the culture, socioeconomic and political situation of the host country; where the host institution is located within the country, and the education level, perceptions and attitudes of the people they encounter.

In dealing with such issues, try to remember some key points. First, being aware of your own self image and expectations is very important. In addition, it is possible that other people’s actions might reflect their curiosity about you. Therefore, keep in mind your own cultural assumption when encountering new situations before jumping to conclusions. It is also good to remember that you do have choices in how to deal with these issues.
Finally, be aware that the ‘culture shock’ and discrimination you may experience may be different than that experienced by your fellow foreign students.

**Being gay, lesbian or bisexual abroad** (from ‘Exploring Cultural Differences’ by Bill Hoffa)

It is important to be aware of the laws pertaining to homosexuality in other countries, as well as the general attitudes of the populace toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of their community. The countries you visit may be more, or may be less, ‘liberated’ (on a general US scale of values) in these regards but will in all cases be at least somewhat unique.

Moreover, whatever the general rule, there will always be pockets of difference and personal idiosyncrasies. Country-specific information is often available from campus offices, personnel, and student groups. You should certainly talk with other students who have been where you will be.

For information on issues and resources pertaining to gay, lesbian, and bisexual travel, you may also want to consult publications available in most bookstores and libraries which carry such literature as *Gaia’s Guide*, ‘an international guide for traveling women,’ that includes information on restaurants, accommodations, travel, and the like; or *Sparticus International Gay Guide* (http://www.spartacusworld.com/en), and *Out Traveler* (http://www.outtraveler.com/), which provides listings of hotlines, publications, bars, etc. for gay men throughout the world.

**Special note to women** (from ‘Exploring Cultural Differences’ by Bill Hoffa)

Some women students, in certain overseas countries (e.g. South America, the Middle East and parts of Europe) have a hard time adjusting to attitudes they encounter abroad, in both public and private interactions between men and women. Some (but not all) men in such countries openly demonstrate their appraisal of women in ways that many American women find offensive. It is not uncommon to be honked at, stared at, verbally and loudly appraised, and to be actively noticed for being an American woman. Sometimes the attention can be flattering. However, it may become very annoying, and potentially even angering.

Indigenous women, who often get the same sort of treatment, have been taught how to ignore the attention. Many American women students find this hard to do. Eye contact between strangers or a smile at someone passing in the street, which is not uncommon in the States, may result in totally unexpected invitations overseas. Some women feel they are forced to stare intently at the ground while they walk down the street.

You will have to learn what the unwritten rules are about what you can and cannot do abroad. Women can provide support for each other, and former students suggest that you get together several times early in your stay overseas to talk about what works and what doesn’t for dealing with the unwanted attention. American women are seen as ‘liberated’ in many ways, and sometimes the cultural misunderstandings that come out of this image can lead to difficult and unpleasant experiences.

Needless to say, this special and surprising status may make male-female relationships more difficult to develop. Be careful about the implicit messages you may be unintentionally communicating. Above all, try to maintain the perspective that these challenging (and sometimes difficult experiences) are part of the growth of cultural understanding, which is one of the important reasons you are studying abroad.

**Addendum to Bill Hoffa’s article:** On the other hand, also be aware that flirting between men and women is much more commonly – and often *innocently* – carried out in other parts of the world. Don’t make the mistake of always misconstruing friendly attention or suggestive conversation from a local as indicative of a sexual come on. That may just be the way people talk to each other in that particular culture. *Political correctness has not caught on in many other parts of the world. Maintain a vigilant attitude, but don’t dismiss new acquaintances just because they use humor or touching in a different manner from what you are used to.*