

Culture Shock

I. An Introduction

First coined in 1958, the concept of “culture shock” has become increasingly used to describe the challenges people confront when entering an unfamiliar social environment. While the term itself portrays these difficulties of adjustment as immediate, drastic, yet fleeting, in actuality, the process is more like a common cold than a cultural shock. In other words, the symptoms of culture shock often present themselves gradually and may not begin until after one spends some time in the new environment. In fact, many people have equated the process of adjustment to a U-Curve. Plus, just like cold symptoms, signs of culture shock can be mistaken for other problems or concerns.

The purpose of the following guide is to provide you with some tools that will help you to anticipate possible challenges while abroad and be more aware of the possible symptoms and stages of adjustment.

However, please always remember that everyone is different. Therefore, the symptoms and stages of culture shock described below are in no way complete or universal. In addition, the duration and extent to which one is immersed in a new environment influences the degree to which culture shock occurs. As a result, while the U-Curve description may be accurate for many people, there are people who will not experience any type of culture shock or who will experience the stages in entirely different sequences. Nevertheless, by expecting some bumps in the road and by being aware of potential difficulties and possible reasons for them, the challenges associated with going abroad can seem more manageable.

II. The U-Curve of Adjustment

At the top!

Description: The top left of the “U” is thought of as the “honeymoon” stage. During the first weeks of one’s time abroad, he/she may feel totally fascinated and exhilarated by his/her surroundings. He/she has planned for this time away for months/years and now he/she is there, with a clean slate, perhaps even relieved to be away from the normal day-to-day stresses of your life back home. Plus, many people spend time getting to know other U.S. students in their program, which helps to provide a sense of comfort, familiarity and stability in these initial days/weeks.

Suggestions: Enjoy yourself. Soak in all that is around you. At the same time, try not to use this time as a standard with which to compare experiences that follow, as you may be setting yourself up for some disappointment. The challenges you face abroad are just as valuable as the periods of excitement and contentment!

Downward Slope

Description: As one spends more time engaging in a new social environment, it is very likely that he/she will begin to experience a loss of social cues. In our day-to-day lives, there are hundreds of different signals which direct us on how to act or what to say. We often learn these cues growing up and as a result, we can become unaware that they even exist. For example, for many people in the U.S., the phrase, “Hi, how are you?” immediately evokes the response, “I’m fine,” even if, in reality, they are having a very bad day. However, in another country, this same cue may cause a different standard response, thereby causing feelings of frustration and even isolation for those who are not “in the know.”

In reaction to these feelings of being an “outsider”, many people have a tendency to blame the environment itself, making such claims as “These people are unfriendly!”, “Things here are so confusing and inefficient!” People may feel an excessive need for cleanliness and concern that what is new and unknown is dirty (e.g. the drinking water, dishes, sheets, etc). They may feel helpless or easily irritated by minor problems. All are symptoms of what has been termed the Rejection Stage, in which one dismisses the new environment as bad or wrong.

In addition, it is possible that people will begin to recall where they came from as perfect, or at least, much better than this new place. One may find him/herself feeling dependent on long-term residents of one’s own nationality, resistant to learning the language of the host country, or wishful to be back home where things are “normal”, “right” and “make sense.” Idealizing where one comes from is also known as the Regression Stage of culture shock.

Suggestions:

- Be observant and curious. If you seem to do or say something incorrect, first remember to give yourself a break – you can’t know everything. Try to observe what others around you do, noting the differences and similarities with how you would act or what you would say.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions (when doing so, try to use a tone of curiosity rather than accusation). When people know that you are interested in learning more about them and their way of life, and are not out to judge them, they are often happy to share! In fact, one of the most common reasons for why people begin to feel more comfortable in a new environment is the formation of a friendship with a local resident. In many ways, this local person serves as a “cultural informant”, helping you to understand your surroundings, rather than dismiss them.
- When you’re in the United States and you have a bad day, do you blame the country of the United States? When you’re running late or can’t find something in a store, do you blame the entire U.S. population? The answers are most likely no. So try not to do the same while abroad.
- If it comes to the point when you feel like you’ve simply had enough of this new place and you’re ready to get on the next flight home, note the day and the time. Check back exactly 48 hours after this specific time and see if you still feel the same. If so, check back 72 hours from then. It is very possible that you will feel better. If

not, make sure you share your concerns with someone – a friend in the program, an instructor, or a program staff member.

As mentioned above, a loss of cues can often bring about symptoms of culture shock. For those cues from home that you seem to miss the most, we have two suggestions:

- **Transfer Cues.** It is possible to anticipate some cues from home that you may miss the most when abroad. Before you leave for your program, think about certain items that you can transfer with you -- perhaps a family photograph, a favorite CD, or memento.
- **Modify Cues.** For those cues that you miss the most and have not brought from home and are not available where you are, be creative. For example, if you miss a certain food, see what ingredients could at least help you create something familiar (use a tortilla instead of pizza dough or shape a hamburger-like patty out of the more common meat).

The Upward Rise

Description: The upwards slope of adjustment usually begins as aspects of the unknown environment become more familiar. As noted above, the formation of a friendship with a local resident often facilitates this process because he/she can help explain what the newcomer does not understand. The process continues as one becomes more comfortable with the transportation system, how to purchase groceries, or check out a library book, for example. For those who are living in a country in which the people speak a different language, increased speaking ability and comprehension also can help create an upward slant. Finally, anticipation of returning home can help inspire a renewed positive outlook and patience for one's surroundings because they may now be deemed temporary.

Suggestions:

- Enjoy this time.
- Give yourself credit for having dealt with some of the initial challenges.
- Continue the momentum of this upward motion and push yourself to get to know more of your surroundings, which will only further increase your comfort level.
- Keep in mind that one can still have bad days and that this stage of “the upward slope” does not mean pure bliss. In fact, one day you may find yourself experiencing a strong sense of optimism about your surroundings and with the loss of your wallet or a call from home, you may find yourself slapped with symptoms of the rejection or regression stages.

III. *Reverse Culture Shock*

When the “U” becomes a “W”

While the notion of culture shock may be increasingly familiar, the idea of reverse culture shock is not as well-known. Many people think that, because they are returning back home where everything is familiar, the process of acclimating should be quite easy.

They do not expect to face the same type of challenges of adjustment as they may have experienced when abroad. In fact, without such expectations, reverse culture shock can feel even more daunting and overwhelming. (Because of this same lack of expectations, U.S. citizens traveling to countries like the UK and Ireland often experience the effects of culture shock more severely than those traveling to more “unfamiliar” destinations.)

In addition, reverse culture shock often stems from what is called the “Uncle Charlie Syndrome.” While abroad, one often has so many different experiences and accumulates so many stories, not to mention pictures. When he/she returns home, he/she may be excited to share it all with family and friends. While often family and friends are eager to listen and look at first, this eagerness can dissipate before all of the stories are told; or, as the “Uncle Charlie Syndrome” connotes, one’s stories from abroad may be interrupted by friends’ and families’ own stories about Uncle Charlie’s broken leg or Aunt Sue’s incredible Thanksgiving pie. These stories may seem trivial as compared to one’s adventure hiking the Himalayas or eating some extravagant dish in South America, and one can begin to feel silenced. As a result, the Uncle Charlie Syndrome can cause not only frustration, but a sense of distance towards those to whom one has always felt close.

Suggestions:

- Anticipate that you may confront challenges when coming home.
- Remind yourself that while you were abroad, life was still going on at home and that everyone’s experiences are equally valuable, even if they seem trivial to you.
- Look for other outlets to share your stories.
 - Attend the Study Abroad Office’s Returnee Reception, which will occur twice a year and provide you the opportunity to share feedback with our office, as well as meet other students who have gone abroad. Keeping in touch with other people that have gone abroad can be very useful in managing reverse culture shock. Returnees may be more likely to engage in lengthy conversations about being away as well as provide empathy for the challenges you are experiencing upon your return home.
 - Through Terps Abroad, a student group for returnees, you can share your stories with the UMD campus at Information Fairs and class presentations.
 - Attend the International Opportunities Fair hosted by the Study Abroad Office. There you will be able to learn about international career opportunities and further ways to study abroad.
 - Stay in touch with the Study Abroad Office! We are working diligently to create more opportunities for returned students to integrate their experiences abroad with their life back home and we welcome your ideas.
 - By labeling your pictures and writing down your stories and memories in a journal, you will have a forum in which to look back on your experience for years to come.