

For Students Studying Abroad

... Things to Consider

By Lisa Novinska

Culture shock is *not* a psychological disorder, but in fact, it is a *developmental phase* that is both common among travelers and expected when one adjusts “properly” in a cross-cultural context. It is important to recognize culture shock since the symptoms can mimic more severe psychological disorders, such as depression.

What is culture shock?

While there are many academic definitions of culture shock, the experience can be simply described as a clash between one’s personal way of viewing and interacting with the world (which is determined by one’s home culture) and the new cultural environment. Often this is experienced as a perceived lack of control or a sense of helplessness. Anxiety, frustration, confusion, loss of perceptual cues, discrepant meaning systems – all these contribute to the “clash.”

Culture shock is an adjustment cycle, with an initial high point upon entry marked by excitement and optimism, a low point during the culture shock phase, and a moderated “high point” near the end of the traveling experience as a student learns to function more successfully. “W-Curve” model (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963) is frequently cited because it describes not just the initial culture show stages (Excitement, Disillusionment, Confusion, and Positive Adjustment), but replicates a similar adjustment cycle for reentry “back home.” While reentry might seem like a non-issue, in fact, it is often experienced as more stressful than the initial culture shock.

Culture shock is about becoming culturally competent in a new cultural environment, where the rules, behaviors, expectations, food, language, and systems are all different from home. Cultural shock is perfectly natural. When struggling through such a challenge, growth occurs! Studies suggest when the intention/expectation is to grow and experience some discomfort as a part of the experience, growth does occur psychologically and socially. Positive changes in attitudes, behaviors, global awareness, worldviews, values, cultural understanding and empathy, ethno relativism, have all been documented.

For some, cultural shock only lasts a few weeks, while it takes others much longer. The expected time frame seems to be proportionate to the time you will be studying abroad. How long it will take an individual depends on his/her resources (internally and externally).

Is Cultural Shock Always “Painful?”

What seems to make the favorable difference for many is their openness to cultural differences, readiness for change/growth, and tolerance for ambiguity and stress. Cultural shock can be exacerbated when a student is isolated or isolative.

What is reverse cultural shock?

It is described as the difficulties one experiences readapting and readjusting to one’s own home culture after one has traveled or lived in another cultural environment (Gaw, 2000). Similar to cultural shock, students who return from studying abroad and reenter into their home environment will often feel out of place in their own home country and culture and question American cultural norms and values. While everything seems familiar, the student may feel different. They may

experience a sense of estrangement from their former selves and lives. Students have likely gained a new world view, helping them to see choices where formerly there was no questions of how something should be done. The everyday routine of eating, bathing, dressing, commuting, and sleeping can all be affected by different customs and beliefs.

A student's return home is usually characterized by two unique elements or mistaken attitudes, which frequently result in frustrated expectations, various degrees of alienation, and mutual misunderstanding between returnees and their friends and family (La Brack, 1999-2000). The first element is an idealized view of home. Students often have a picture perfect memory of their home life that they cling to while away, often as a coping strategy to manage homesickness. This memory may be challenged and dislodged upon their return home, leading to feelings of disappointment and discontentment.

The second element is a familiarity with the home culture. This familiarity fosters the illusion that neither home nor the traveler will have changed since he/she has gone away. The illusion often evokes confusion and frustration, as the student becomes more aware that he/she has changed and his/her home is different.

There are 4 recognized states that seem to be relevant to reverse culture shock (adapted from Notre Dame's website (A Handbook for International Educators: [www.nd.edu/%7Eucc/International Eds Hdbk 1.html](http://www.nd.edu/%7Eucc/International%20Eds%20Hdbk%201.html))

- 1) Disengagement: The anticipation the student experiences while still abroad as he/she begins to think about moving back to his/her home country and move away from his/her overseas experience and friends. Although they may generally remain very involved and engaged in their overseas experience, their mind begins to shift towards returning home.
- 2) Euphoria: The initial excitement of being back in his/her country, which includes others' equal delight to have him/her back home. However, after the initial welcoming weeks, the student may experience sudden or painful realizations that others may not be particularly interested in his/her experience overseas, or may not be able to understand or relate to the student's overseas experience.
- 3) Alienation: The student may feel disengaged, frustrated, and angry for feeling like an outsider in his/her own home, school, and country. The returnee may feel resentment, loneliness, and a sense of helplessness as he/she feels disoriented in his/her home country. It is often during this phase that the returnee experiences a "hidden immigrant" identity – that they might look like their peers, but they feel very different.
- 4) Gradual readjustment: The student readjusts to life at home and/or school as he/she begins to resolve problematic cultural conflicts, begins to behave with competence, and feels less shocked by his/her surroundings and readjusts. Readjustment is commonly noticed by a new sense of self and broader definition of identity.