

Culture shock and communication

Avoiding misadventures in cross cultural relations

Adapted with permission from Sabrina Butteris, MD, & James Conway, MD; UW-Madison Department of Pediatrics

Culture shock is a well-described phenomenon that affects all travelers to varying degrees. Whether you are a seasoned traveler or this is your first trip out of the United States, you may find that the natural adjustments that occur during your time in your host community are amplified; you will not only be living in a new place but you will be adapting to a new work environment.

Being cognizant of your feelings and emotions as they relate to situations you encounter during your field experience will help you to moderate your reactions, improve your interactions with your colleagues, and walk away with a more complete picture of the community in which you will be spending the next few weeks. Private documentation of your reflections throughout your field experience will provide you with some protection from unnecessary cultural misunderstandings and offenses.

Culture Shock – an Overview

What Is It?

“The loss of emotional equilibrium that a person suffers when he moves from a familiar environment where he has learned to function easily and successfully to one where he has not.” – Arthur Gordon

Why Does It Happen?

Over the course of our lives, our own culture becomes deeply engrained via habitual, learned behaviors. Our culture quickly becomes invisible to us. We believe that the way we have grown to know life is the way that it should be, it is “normal.” Without knowing, our ways of living become ingrained as moral claims. When we enter a new culture we experience an abrupt loss of familiarity. We try to understand the different norms and guidelines that dictate life in the new culture. We are forced to re-learn how to live day to day. While we strive to do what is appropriate, we often don’t know exactly what that is. This creates a sense of social isolation and differences subconsciously become classified as senseless, irrational or even immoral.

What are the Signs & Symptoms?

Like many conditions, the way culture shock is manifested exists on a spectrum ranging from mild uneasiness to unhappiness to true panic. While the list below is not all-inclusive, it is likely that you will experience some of the following:

Frustration	Irritability	Hypersensitivity
Boredom	Lack of motivation	Physical discomfort/mental fatigue
Suspicion (feeling like everyone is trying to take advantage of you)	Over concern for cleanliness	Disorientation about how to work with/relate to others

Stages of Culture Shock

There are many different versions of the stages of culture shock; however, they vary mostly in complexity rather than true content. The most commonly used stages described are:

- *Honeymoon* – exciting, see similarities
- *Rejection* (shock) – everything feels hard, see only differences
- *Regression* – glorification of home country, critical of new, superior attitude
- *Acceptance/Negotiation* – develop routine, sense of humor returns
- *Reverse culture shock* – incorporating the “new” you into your “old” life

Distilled into its most basic form, the stages of culture shock can be simplified:

At first we think it is charming
Then we think it is evil
Then we think it is different

From William Drake & Associates, Managing Culture Shock

Reactions

Typical reactions include assuming the problem lies in everyone else (i.e. something is wrong with “them”, not “us”), over-valuing our own culture, defining our culture in moral terms (natural, rational, civilized, polite), undervaluing the new culture and seeing it as chaotic or immoral, and stereotyping in an attempt to make the world predictable.

When Culture Shock Leads to Cultural Insensitivity

How we react to the culture shock we are experiencing is the crux of what causes well-intentioned people to display unsavory behaviors. Culturally-insensitive and inappropriate situations arise when our behavior, actions (and reactions), and responses reflect the stage of culture shock we are experiencing. To make matters worse, when you are feeling the most frustrated, you have the least amount of information available to help you understand why things happen the way that they do. While your understanding of the system will greatly increase during your time at your host site, in your short time there it will be impossible for you to fully understand the complex set of interactions occurring simultaneously. Being aware of your emotional reactions and always attempting to increase your understanding will not only enhance your personal experience but also decrease the likelihood that something you do will reflect poorly on you, your colleagues and your program.

Culture Shock and the Internet

In today’s world of email, Facebook, and blogs, the public sharing of thoughts, ideas, and feelings has become commonplace. As opposed to individualized, personal communication (phone calls or letters), these modes of communication allow for complete transparency of thought. In the context of global health experiences and reactions to the stages of culture shock, this level of transparency can be damaging. With an incomplete understanding of the culture in which one is living, a well-intentioned writer may unintentionally use descriptors that are culturally insensitive or unacceptable. As a visitor passes through the various stages of culture shock, their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about their host community will inevitably change. Reflecting on these emotions and experiences in a forum that could be available to others not only poses ethical and professional dilemmas but also has the potential for lasting cultural misunderstandings and transgressions that will impact the individual as well as the institution.

As the sharing of information becomes increasingly easy, the risk for inadvertent viewing of that same material also increases. Far too often, communication intended for family or friends is forwarded or found by people who may not fully understand or appreciate the context. Many forms of communication can and have been the cause of misunderstandings: blogs, social networking websites (Facebook, MySpace, etc.), email, postcards, photo sites (Flickr, etc.), You Tube, electronic documents, print materials, publications (local, national, etc.), and presentations (taped, not taped).

Successfully Navigating the Seas of Cultural Competence

Be aware that culture shock affects even the most seasoned and experienced traveler. All writers feel that they have been both self-aware and sensitive as they are creating and sharing their observations. However, the process of culture shock involves shifting perceptions of one’s surroundings over time. This constantly evolving experience and the ease of information dissemination makes the risks associated with electronic sharing of critical importance for all partners in global health relationships.

While culture shock is an unavoidable phenomenon, understanding how the adjustment to a new culture can affect thoughts and behaviors may allow a visitor to better moderate their reactions. Incorporating this knowledge into private and thoughtful reflection is a key element of developing cultural competence. Combined with humility and patience, this practice can lead to meaningful, life-long relationships between global partners.

Commitment to Professionalism – Communication Guidelines

First and foremost, remember that you are a visitor and a guest. Your role during your field experience should reflect this idea. You are to uphold the highest standards of professionalism, respect, and courtesy.

Throughout your field experience you will not only be acting as an ambassador on behalf of your residency training program, but also of the United States. Your behavior during your field experience not only has the ability to impact the health of the partnership with your host site, but also directly reflects upon the character of those from your residency training program.

Prioritizing the right to privacy of our host communities and individuals within those communities and a commitment to developing culturally-sensitive collaborations, great discretion should be used when communicating details of your experience with those outside of the host community. Refer to your residency training program's privacy policies regarding patient information and patient photography, and uphold the same privacy standards at your host site. The use of internet-based venues for communication is strongly discouraged. Full disclosure and transparency of purpose must be provided to those being photographed (including how the photograph may be used and who will be able to see it) and permission should always be obtained from both the patient (or parent) and the hosting institution.

Lastly, presentations given on return should be mindful of portraying the host community in a way that would be considered respectful and culturally appropriate in that setting. Presentations should be reviewed with your Global Health Faculty Mentor and/or the host institution prior to being delivered.

Culture shock resources and further reading

1. Foster J. Cultural Humility and the Importance of Long-Term Relationships in International Partnerships. *JOGNN*. 2009;38:100-107.
2. Kamei R. Why Dying Doesn't Seem to Matter: The Influence of Culture on Physicians in Bali, Indonesia. *Acad Med*. 2003 Jun;78(6):635.
3. Koehn P. Globalization, Migration Health, and Educational Preparation for Transnational Medical Encounters. *Globalization and Health*. 2006;2(2).
4. Kumagai A, Lypson M. Beyond Cultural Competence: Critical Consciousness, Social Justice, and Multicultural Education. *Acad Med*. 2009 Jun;84(6):782-787.
5. Levi A. The Ethics of Nursing Student International Clinical Experiences. *JOGNN*. 2009;38:94-99.
6. Pedersen, Paul. *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World*. Contributions in Psychology, No. 25. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995.

Web resources

1. <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/cGuanipa/cultshok.htm>
2. <http://www.juliaferguson.com/shock.html>
3. <http://international.engr.wisc.edu/preparing/cultureshock.php>
4. <http://www.cals.wisc.edu/studyabroad/students/intl-student-incoming/cultureshock.htm>
5. http://www.worldwide.edu/travel_planner/culture_shock.html
6. http://www.larissa-becker.de/culture_shock.doc
7. <http://medicine.creighton.edu/projectcure/cultureshock.htm>