

## Culture Shock

As you ready yourself to study abroad, you have gone through a number of preparations: making sure that you were academically prepared, securing necessary finances, saying good-bye to the comfort of family, friends, and familiar surroundings, and booking travel arrangements, acquiring language skills, to name but a few. Once you get abroad, things should go smoothly, right? You should immediately fit into your new routine in a totally new education and living environment, right? If that actually happens, then you are among a rare group of individuals, indeed!

Most people who move between cultures (for study, work, tourism, or to take up a new permanent residence) experience a period of adjustment as they establish themselves in their new environment. The adjustment period may be accompanied by dramatic manifestations of symptoms such as anxiety, headaches, digestive problems, and sleep disorders, or may bring less severe symptoms such as discomfort and a more volatile temperament. Research shows that most people who sojourn outside their home culture experience cultural adjustment in similar ways which, when charted, have come to be known as **The U Curve of Cultural Adaptation**. It is called a "U Curve" because people generally start at a high point, then experience a decline, or depression, before a leveling off period, then go through a critical "recovery" stage and end up more or less balanced, where they began. When charted, it looks something like this:



If you should experience any of the difficulties of learning to live in a new culture, it is important to recognize that you are not alone! You are in step with thousands of others who have crossed cultures for whatever purpose.

### **Cultural Adaptation is a Natural Process**

Your worth as a person, your strength, your stamina, and your flexibility are not in question! You are not lessened by the cultural adaptation process; it is simply a natural phase in the overall cross-cultural experience.

### **Cultural Adaptation is an Individual Process**

You may not experience the adjustment process in exactly the same way as your classmates. Each person's experience is shaped by what s/he brings to it. In the same fashion, the rapidity with which you go through the adaptation is highly individual. For some it is a question of weeks, for others, months. And some experience the process more than once during their sojourn!

Some people find cultural differences interesting and stimulating, and they want more! Others, when experiencing discomfort or confusion, have a tendency to judge or evaluate other people and to reach negative conclusions. Surely the first type of person has the greater possibility to gain the most benefit from his or her stay in a host culture. Perhaps this information will assist you in making your experience an adventure, rather than an ordeal!

If forewarned is forearmed, then certainly you will be ahead of the game if you THINK about what you are experiencing, and if you have some idea of what to expect. The "U Curve of Cultural Adaptation" may help you understand your transitional stages.

## Stages of Cultural Adaptation

### The Honeymoon Stage

Common thoughts during the Honeymoon Stage include:

*Isn't this exciting? I can't wait to tell \_\_\_\_\_ about this. Aren't they interesting? Everything here is so \_\_\_\_\_!*

Characteristics of the Honeymoon Stage:

- You are busy taking care of business (registration, housing, bank account, etc.)
- You are observing the new culture and familiarizing yourself with the new environment
- You are meeting useful and friendly university staff
- You are making your first social contacts with members of the host culture
- You are seeing and doing new things and enjoying a new world

### The Conflict Stage

Common thoughts during the Conflict stage include:

*We would never do that in my country! Why can't they just \_\_\_\_\_?  
I only have \_\_ months before I go home. These people are so \_\_\_\_\_!*

Characteristics of the Conflict Stage:

- You begin to desire more personal relationships with members of the host culture
- You find you have little time or opportunity to make friends
- You are feeling isolated, out of place
- You may feel tired, sick, depressed, angry, or frustrated
- You have a growing awareness that your home culture's behaviors may not be accepted in the host culture, and you may have to give up, suspend, or modify your own behavior
- Your high expectations remain unmet
- You blame the host culture for your problems
- You spend lots of time with members of your home culture complaining about the host culture
- You experience problems with the subtleties of the target language

### The Critical Stage

Common thoughts during the Critical Stage include:

*Why shouldn't they say/do that? We say/do that too, but differently*

Characteristics of the Critical Stage:

- You choose to become an "explorer" in the new culture
- You accept the challenge of self-reflection
- You assume responsibility for your own cultural adjustment

## **The Recovery Stage**

Common thoughts during the Recovery Stage include:

*You don't understand them like I do. I'm beginning to like this.*

Characteristics of the Recovery Stage:

- Your language skills improve noticeably
- You begin to understand the actions of members of the host culture
- You have finally made friends and feel part of the community
- You develop a greater tolerance for what is strange and new
- You become a mediator between the two cultures
- You feel proud that you can make yourself understood in the target language and that you can understand native speakers

## **Hints to Make the Cultural Transition Easier**

### **Ask Questions**

Ask questions of the practical nature, such as "Where may I find foodstuffs from my home country?", or "Where is the nearest bank?", but also ask questions about persons' opinions on things, and about their experiences. Ask for their reactions to happenings, newspaper articles, television programs, etc. You may find that some stereotypes you held about your new host culture are crumbling!

### **Learn and Practice the Local Language**

There are regional and local variations to most languages. Learn the version that pertains in your new host culture. Watch television, listen to the radio, read local newspapers, and Talk! Talk! Talk! with persons you encounter everywhere you go during your everyday routine.

### **Observe Ritual Social Interactions**

Notice what people say and how they say it when they greet an acquaintance, when they are introduced to a stranger, when they take leave of a friend or of someone they have just met. Watch for variations with age, sex, and apparent social status.

### **Take "Field Trips"**

A field trip is a visit to a place where you can observe what happens. Yours may be conducted in a visit to someone's home, at the grocery store, riding public transportation, attending a church service, or visiting a public school. You may be amazed by how much you can learn simply by observing.

### **Talk with Experienced International Students**

One of the benefits of studying at most universities abroad is the presence of other international students from different countries. Their experiences can be an invaluable resource for you, the new sojourner. Don't limit yourself to members of your own culture group: be adventuresome!

### **Keep a Journal**

Journal-keeping is a time-honored method of coping with a new culture. Writing about your experiences forces you to be observant and to reflect on what is happening to you and around you.

### **Read**

An abundance of materials exist about your new national, regional, and local host cultures. Newspapers, magazines, and the university libraries are excellent resources for your quest.

**View Yourself as a Teacher**

You can use your stay abroad to teach at least a few host country nationals about your home culture. Thinking of yourself as a teacher may give you additional patience and help you avoid becoming irritated when asked questions which may seem just plain stupid to you!

**Reflect**

An essential part of the cultural adaptation process is taking time to reflect on what is happening to you and around you. Demands of academics are rigorous and reflection time won't happen unless you purposefully set out to reserve the time for it. Ask yourself such questions as "What did I expect from my study abroad experience?" and "How does reality compare with my expectations?" "What can I do to make my experience more constructive and interesting?" and "How is the experience preparing me to meet my goals for the future?"

**ON-LINE CULTURAL TRAINING RESOURCE FOR STUDY ABROAD**

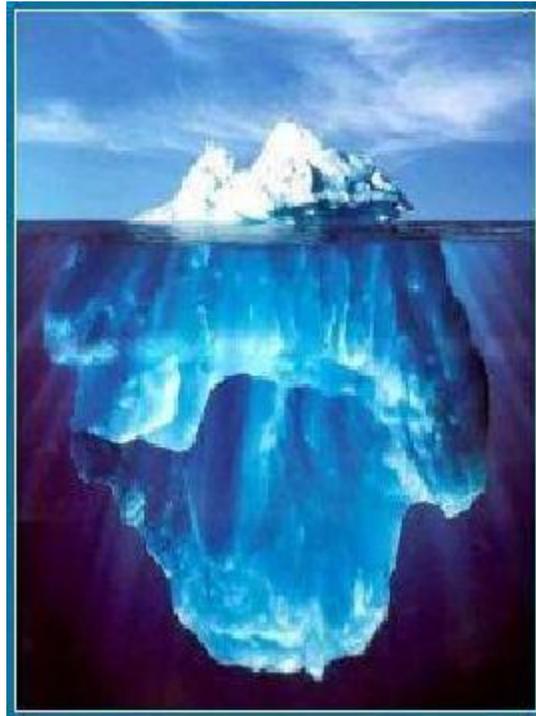


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**WHAT'S UP WITH CULTURE?**

<http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm?page=/sis/culture/>

## The Iceberg



by: Raph Clevenger

### Iceberg Exercise

Culture has been aptly compared to an iceberg. Just as an iceberg has a visible section above the waterline and a larger, invisible section below the water line, so culture has some aspects that are observable and others that can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. Also like an iceberg, the part of culture that is visible (observable behavior) is only a small part of a much bigger whole.

The items that appear below are all features of culture. Keeping in mind that observable behaviors belong above the surface of the water, while the invisible aspects of culture belong below the surface, drag each feature to show whether it should be "above" or "below."



Facial gestures

Gestures

Paintings

Values

Holiday customs

Food

Concept of beauty

Eating habits

Music

Concept of fairness

Childraising beliefs

Understanding the natural world

Religious beliefs

Importance of time

Concept of self

Concept of leadership

Literature

Nature of friendship

General world view

Work ethic

Rules of social etiquette

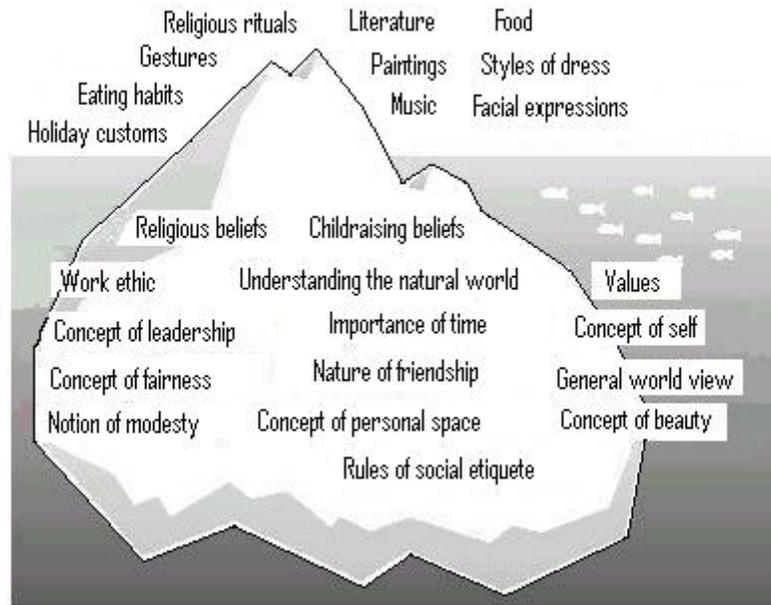
Concept of personal space

Styles of dress

Notion of modesty

Religious rituals

## Suggested Answers



You can see that there is a relationship between those items that appear above the waterline and those that appear below it. In most cases, the invisible aspects of culture influence or cause the visible ones. Religious beliefs, for example, are clearly manifest in certain holiday customs, and notions of modesty affect styles of dress.



**INSIGHT..!** Surface behaviors are influenced by beneath-the-surface values and assumptions.



## Discussion

On the one hand, culture is what makes us all human in a *general sense*. Every culture, past and present, has had to decide how to satisfactorily solve common human problems and concerns. Some universal categories of human activity that have been addressed for millennia by all cultures are:

- religious beliefs and the relationship of humans to the supernatural
- political power and the exercise of leadership in governance
- concepts of justice, fairness, punishment, and right conduct
- child raising and traditional processes of acculturation
- economic organization and division of labor
- rites of passage (life cycle celebrations), rituals, and ceremonies
- expression and style in the graphic and performing arts
- food preferences and rules concerning consumption
- nonverbal communication patterns and gestures
- concepts of humans' place and role in the natural world
- myths and cultural heroes to explain and commemorate core values
- dissemination of ideas about beauty, love, truth, friendship, and loyalty
- notions of modesty and age-appropriate dress styles and behavior
- ideas of what time is and its relative importance
- concerns about individual versus collective privilege and responsibility
- conceptions about personal space and privacy
- definitions of gender and associated strengths, duties, and roles

This list, like all considerations of the highest levels of cultural concerns, is very abstract and general and it would be possible to list hundreds of additional issues or problems which human beings have struggled to resolve. Specific cultures have determined how to deal with these issues by developing ideas and constructing their patterns from a wide range of possible alternatives. Most of those choices were made a long time ago. Members of the culture adopted them as part of defining who they are and those patterns represent some of the knowledge a member of their group must know to belong. The original cultural patterns may have been modified over time but the core of values and beliefs tend to remain constant. Therefore, when you arrive in a foreign country you will be confronting a new culture that is likely to differ significantly from your familiar way of life.

Studying abroad is an opportunity to experience something new and novel directly, and that is what makes study abroad so exciting. In the course of encountering alternative ways to live life and solve problems, it is possible to experience tremendous intellectual and personal growth. Becoming skilled at functioning effectively in another country builds a capacity for making all kinds of transitions and for "cultural learning" generally. Entering another country is not just a geographical shift but a psychological one as well. Three things to keep in mind as you begin to consider the role of culture in the sojourn are:

1. All cultures have struggled with the full range of human problems and they have adopted solutions that are at least acceptable to members of the culture.
2. In the process of forming a culture, a group has made decisions about what to emphasize, how to pass it on to a new generation, and what it values above all else...and you can be sure that it excludes or devalues some things another culture (maybe even you!) holds dear.
3. Because the patterns that exist in various cultures have been passed on by respected leaders and/or elders and have become sanctified over time, they are not only considered good and proper but natural and normal. This is why cultural matters are deeply rooted and intensely felt by members of a society. Therefore, conflict and change involving core values are always accompanied by tension. Studying abroad, which promotes encountering cultural difference and, hopefully, crossing cultural boundaries, can be expected to be uncomfortable and even incomprehensible some of the time.

Source: University of Pacific, **ON-LINE CULTURAL TRAINING RESOURCE FOR STUDY ABROAD**, <http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm?page=/sis/culture/>

## CROSS – CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

“I have often thought there ought to be a manual to hand to little kids, telling them what kind of planet they’re on...called ‘Welcome to Earth’...and one thing I would really like to tell them about is cultural relativity. I didn’t learn until I was in college about all the other cultures, and I should have learned in the first grade.

A first grader should understand that his or her culture isn’t a rational invention; that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; that there are lots of alternatives to our own society. Cultural relativity is defensible and attractive. It’s a source of hope.”

-Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Wampeter, Foma and Granfaloon

### Strategies for adjusting to a new culture

| <b>Strategy</b>       | <b>Effective form</b>  | <b>Ineffective form</b>  |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Avoidance             | Temporary, occasional withdrawal to overcome “Cultural fatigue”                    | Frequent or complete withdrawal, no interaction with the culture   |
| Participation         | Working to learn the ways of the culture (assertive behavior)                      | Fighting against the culture (aggressive behavior)   |
| Utilizing Resources   | Using resources to promote learning and self reliance                              | Becoming totally dependent on resources  |
| Utilizing stereotypes | Using only as a tentative guide to culture; constantly challenging them            | Using as a complete guide to the culture; never testing them   |
| Studying the culture  | Striving to acquire cultural insights; learning new perspectives                   | Fitting new culture into own framework; rejecting new insights, perspectives   |
| Utilizing the culture | Developing effective coping strategies; enlarging skills; maintaining own identity | “Going native” – totally adopting the culture as one’s own; losing own identity. Most cultures do not want you to “go native” – they want you to learn and respect their culture |

Certain personality characteristics are useful to develop when living in another culture. They include:

1. Flexibility
2. Tolerance of ambiguity or living with uncertainty
3. Non-judgmental attitudes
4. Patience
5. A willingness to take risks

Some other guidelines of cross-cultural effectiveness would include:

1. Remember that you are a guest in another culture and a representative of your own. Don't assume that the American way is the best way; this is an arrogant, ethnocentric attitude. Be gracious.
2. Be realistic and don't try to understand everything immediately. You will undoubtedly have times when you are not able to communicate as well as you would like or are used to. This will help you develop creative "coping" strategies.
3. Be open to new experiences. Explore and get off the tourist track. Take an interest in the culture, ask questions, and be enthusiastic.

Source: This material comes from a hand-out by Nancy Westfall de Gurrola