

# Culture shock

## Choque cultural

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### Abstract

This paper considers the popular concept of culture shock. From the academic perspective co-researchers from different disciplines (anthropology, education, psychiatry, psychology, sociology) have attempted to operationalise the concept and understand the process behind it. It represents fifty years of research using different methodologies and trying to answer different questions about the experience of travel for many reasons. This paper also considers issues concerned with the “overseas” student, of which there are ever more, travelling abroad to study. They can have serious culture shock difficulties. Implications of this research are considered.

Keywords: Adjustment (to Environment); Cultural Background; Culture Conflict; Interpersonal Competence; Study Abroad; Travel

### Resumen

El presente artículo pretende abordar el popular concepto de choque cultural. Desde una perspectiva académica, co-investigadores de diferentes disciplinas (antropología, educación, psiquiatría, psicología, sociología) han intentado operacionalizar el concepto y comprender el proceso subyacente. Este artículo compila cincuenta años de investigación sirviéndose de diferentes metodologías y tratando de responder las distintas preguntas acerca de la experiencia de viajar. Este artículo también aborda las cuestiones relacionadas con el estudiante “foráneo”, de los cuales hay cada vez más, viajando al extranjero para estudiar. Estudiantes que han de enfrentarse a serias dificultades concernientes al choque cultural. Se han considerado las implicaciones de esta investigación.

Palabras clave: Adaptación al entorno, trasfondo cultural, conflicto cultural, competencia interpersonal, estudiar en el extranjero, viajar

## Introduction

People have, and will always, travel to “far off lands”, different countries and regions for very different purposes. To convert and then conquer, the trade and to teach, to learn and to settle. There are many ways to categorise these travellers i.e. how long they go for (i.e. migrants vs. sojourners vs. tourists); how far they travel (near vs. far); their motives for movement (education, trade, expansion); the nature of stranger-host relations (friendly vs. antagonistic). There are many types of sojourners: business people, diplomats, the armed forces, students, voluntary and aid workers, missionaries, etc., who often spend six months to over five years in ‘other countries’ in order to do business; represent their country; protect others or instruct other armed forces; study; teach or advise locals; convert and proselytize, respectively. It is obviously important that these sojourners adapt to the new culture rapidly in order that they may operate effectively in whatever they are doing. The costs of repatriation and breakdown are high.

Bochner (1982) have attempted to classify individuals in terms of their psychological responses to the host country. He posited that there are 4 main ways in which people behave when in a new culture:

*‘Passing’* - rejecting the culture of origin and embracing the new culture. The original culture’s norms lose their salience and the new culture’s norms gain salience. This type of mind set may be prevalent for migrants looking for employment that have come from war-torn countries and seek a new life.

*‘Chauvinism’* - rejection of the current culture and exaggerating the original. The original culture’s norms increase in salience and the new culture’s norms decrease in salience. This can cause an increased feeling of nationalism for the individual and can lead to racism, and as a society cause inter-group friction. This type of mind set is increasingly rare, with people becoming more accepting of other cultures and religions.

*‘Marginal’* - hovering between the two cultures, the individual is not certain of who he/she is. Norms of both cultures are salient but are perceived as mutually incompatible. This leads to mental confusion for the individual, over compensation and conflict and for the society causes reform and social change. Again this type of mind set is increasingly rare, with integration into a foreign society being greatly eased.

*‘Mediating’* - synthesizing both cultures. This mind set is most ideal as it can mediate between both cultures. Norms of both cultures are salient and are perceived as capable of being integrated. This leads to the individual

growing personally and society exhibiting higher levels of inter-group harmony and cultural preservation. This is probably the most prevalent mind-set that can be.

There is dispute and debate as to who conceived the concept of culture shock and precisely when this occurred. There is less debate about its definition and psychological consequences. Over the years various researchers have tried to refine the definition of the term looking at very specific psychological factors or facets that make up the experience (Winkelman, 2010; Xia, 2009). It has been seen as a loss of one's culture, a marker of moving from one culture to another and as a re-socialisation in another culture. It comes as a "hurtful surprise" to many who travel for various reasons.

### Definitions

There remains no clear definition of culture shock, usually attributed to the anthropologist, Oberg (1960) over 40 years ago. Various attempts have been made to "unpack" the definition (Ward et al. 2001):

1. Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations.

2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions.
3. Being rejected by/and or rejecting members of the new culture.
4. Confusion in role, role expectations, values.
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences.
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

Whilst the term culture shock may have originated in the academic literature it very quickly took root in the popular imagination. The popular media has been full of references to culture shock for 50 years. Guides in how to mitigate the effects of culture shock are offered to all sorts of travels. People recognise it immediately though they are surprised by it. There are many related definitions but they nearly all convey a similar meaning. The concepts quoted are: "disorientation", "anxious confusion", "disease", "mental shock" or "transition shock": it is agreed that culture shock is a disorientating experience of suddenly finding that the perspectives, behaviours and experience of an individual or group or whole society are not shared by others. However it is also agreed that it is a ubiquitous and normal stage in any acculturative adaptive process that

all “travellers” experience. Going to ‘strange places’ and losing the power of easy communication can disrupt self-identity, world views and indeed all systems of acting, feeling and thinking.

There are long lists of the symptoms of culture shock which include cognitive, emotional, physiological and other reactions. Some researchers have attempted to specify personal

factors that seem to predict who and how much individuals suffer from culture shock like Openness, Neuroticism, Language proficiency and tolerance for contradiction (Spencer-Rodgers, Wolliams & Peng, 2010).

There are many rich personal accounts and helpful advice procedures for people to develop better “emotional resilience” to move between cultures

Table 1

*Traditional theoretical approaches to culture shock. Adapted from Zhou et al. (2008)*

Theory	Epistemological origin	Conceptual formulation
Grief and Bereavement	Psychoanalytic tradition	Sees migration as experience of and adaptation to loss
Locus of Control	Applied social psychology	Control (Internal/External) predict migration adaptation
Selective migration	Socio-biology	Individual fitness and motivation predicts adaptation
Expectations	Applied social psychology	Expectancy-values relate to reasons for migration and adjustment
Negative life-events	Clinical psychology	Migration involves many stressful life changes,
Social support	Clinical psychology	Social and emotional support offers a buffering effect
Value difference	Social psychology	Implicit and explicit value differences lead to poor adaptation
Social skills and culture learning	Social psychology	Lacking social skills may cause constant communication problems

Table 2

*Contemporary theories of intercultural contact. Adapted from Zhou et al, (2008)*

Theory	Conceptual Framework	Theoretical Premise	Factors affecting adjustment	Intervention guidelines
Stress and Coping (Affect)	Cross-cultural travellers need to develop special coping strategies to deal with the stress of migration	All life changes are constant but inherently stressful	Adjustment factors involving personal (demographic, personality, values) and situational (e.g. social support)	Training people to develop robust stress-coping and management skills
Culture Learning (Behaviour)	Cross-cultural travellers need to learn culturally relevant social skills to communicate in their new settings	Social interaction is a skilled performance which has to be learnt and practiced	Culture specific variables: knowledge about a new culture, language/ communication competence, social intelligence cultural distance.	Preparation, orientation and culture learning, especially behavioural-based social skill training as well as social and emotional intelligence
Social Identification (Social Cognition)	Cross-cultural transition have to adjust to changes in cultural identity and inter-group relations	Sense of personal and group identity is a fundamental issue for all travellers	Cognitive variables knowledgeable of the host culture (History, Religion, Etiquette) beliefs/attitudes between hosts and sojourners, cultural similarity, cultural identity	Enhancing self-esteem, overcoming barriers to inter-group harmony, emphasising inter-group similarities and identity

(Abarbanel, 2009; Azeez et al, 2004; Barrett, 2009; Bourne, 2009; Green, 2006). This includes what people in educational and work environments can and should do to lessen the

experience of culture shock (Guy & Patton, 1996).

Culture shock has been studied in many groups including tourists (Cort & King, 1979; students (Gaw, 2000; Sayers & Franklin, 2008, Willis, 2009;

Xiaoqiong, 2008) and working people (Guy & Patton, 1996). The costs of expatriate failure have encouraged researchers to try and understand causes as well as reduce the amount of culture shock that results (Pires, Stanton & Ostefeld, 2006)

Some researchers have developed and tested simple models to try to predict who suffers most from culture shock (Kaye & Taylor, 1997). Shupe (2007) proposed a model to understand international student conflict. However the most sophisticated model has been proposed by Zhou, Jondal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008).

They suggested that there are essentially three contemporary theories in the area: Stress and Coping (cross-culturally travellers need to develop coping strategies to deal with stress because life changes are inherently stressful); Culture Learning (cross-cultural travellers need to learn culturally relevant social skills to survive and thrive in their new settings); and Social Identification (Cross-cultural transition may involve changes in cultural identity and inter-group relations). They propose that there are both individual level (person and situation factors) and societal level variables (society of origin and society of settlement) that jointly determine stress and skills deficit which in turn determines stress coping and skills acquisition. Following this, they noted

how culture differences in learning practices and procedures leads to mismatching, misunderstanding and misery as students go abroad to further their education.

There are few psychometric tools specifically trying to measure culture shock. Rudmin (2009) reviewed various measures of acculturation and acculturative stress of which there are a number. However, Mumford (1998) devised and validated a short 12 item measure divided into Core items and Interpersonal stress items

Culture shock is conceived as a serious, acute and sometimes chronic affective reaction to a new (social) environment. However there are other closely related “shocking” experiences. These include:

- *Invasion shock*: this occurs in places where tourists or other visitors suddenly appear in large numbers in a particular setting and overwhelm the locals who become a minority in their own living space. Because the “invaders” retain their cultural morals (of dress, social interaction) they can surprise, frustrate and offend the locals. In this sense they have culture shock without actually going anywhere. Pyvis and Chapman (2010) noted how home students can feel culture in their home country but at an institution

that accepted many overseas students

- *Reverse culture shock*: this occurs when returning to one's home culture to find it different from that which was recalled. In this sense, you can never go home again because it does not exist. It is about readjusting; reacculturating and re-assimilating in the home culture (Gaw, 2000)
- *Re-professionalisation and Re-licencing shock*: this occurs when trained professionals do not have their qualifications accepted by a host country and have to be retrained and accepted (Austin, 2007; Austin, Gregory & Martin, 2007)
- *Business Shock*: this is the realisation that so many of the subtle business practices vary considerably from one culture to the next (Balls, 2005; Pukthuanthong & Walker, 2007)
- *Race culture shock*: This concerns being a racial minority in an institution within one's country. Class and race specific styles of dress, speech etc can seriously shock people who do not expect them (Torres, 2009)

### **The educational sojourn and culture shock**

Although the practice of students travelling from one country to another has been established for centuries, particularly in Europe, it is not until comparatively recently that they have become the focus of study (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001; Miller & El-Aidi, 2008). There are various books exclusively on foreign students which look at the psychology of their experience (McNamara & Harris, 1997; van Tilburg Vingerhoets, 1997).

Culture-learning and its effects on the ethnic identity of foreign students remain the concerns along with gender issues, staff-student relationships and learning preferences, and styles of different groups. There is also an increasing interest in the social networks of foreign students, both while on sojourn and after returning home. Studies have also looked at the cross-national networks that some of these individuals join as a result of having studied abroad and at the mediating function that these individuals and their networks fulfil in bridging the various cultures to which they have been exposed. Many of the studies now employ a longitudinal design.

Much of this research suggests that many students feel classic alienation especially feelings of powerlessness,

meaningless, and social estrangement while being surrounded by the “superficial pleasantries” of their hosts. Most of the research studies have been aimed at looking at the affective, behavioral and cognitive consequences of cross cultural transition in sojourners and have attempted to establish which individual, interpersonal, social, structural and economic factors best predict adjustment.

What are the implications for helping foreign students, or travelers of any kind. *First*, that counselling should be proactive, not reactive and seek out international students who may be vulnerable. *Second*, guidance services should be continuous and comprehensive, not simply confined to orientation sessions soon after arrival. *Third*, that alternative, less stigmatised approaches should be available through less formal and clinical contacts, such as interest or friendship groups. *Fourth*, students should be encouraged to become involved in their own adaptation process as well as the education process as a whole. *Fifth*, the idea of the buddy system, so long used in the American army should be established. *Sixth*, students could be encouraged to feel a certain amount of empowerment through communication workshops set up for them. *Seventh*, counsellors should be sensitive and trained in culture differences, specifically

the presentation of psychological problems. Indeed there are so many orientation programmes now available at universities that there is an active research programme in measuring their efficacy (McKinlay *et al.*, 1996).

It is perhaps no surprise that educational institutions have established orientation and counselling programmes for their international students. Some studies have reported incidence of fairly severe breakdown. For instance, Janca and Helzer (1992) in a 25 year retrospective analysis of the psychiatric morbidity of foreign students in Yugoslavia, traced 63 foreign and 120 domestic students who were hospitalized, and found high rates of paranoia and depressive reactions. Of the foreign students admitted, 67% showed paranoid delusions, 62% anxiety, and 52% anxiety which they took as evidence of the correlational between “psychiatric morbidity and maladaptation to the new living conditions” (p. 287).

One area of research that is theoretically important is the work on foreign student friendship networks. Bochner and his co-workers (Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977; Furnham & Bochner, 1986) have shown some interesting trends in the friendship networks of overseas students. In a study of foreign students in Hawaii, Bochner *et al.* (1977) developed a *functional* model of overseas students’

friendship patterns, stating that the sojourners belong to three distinct social networks. These are: A *primary, monocultural* network consisting of close friendships with other sojourning compatriots. The main function of the co-national network is to provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed. A *secondary, bicultural* network, consisting of bonds between sojourners and significant host nationals such as academics, students, advisors and government officials. The main function of this network is to facilitate instrumentally the academic and professional aspirations of the sojourner. A *third, multicultural* network of friends and acquaintances. The main function of this network is to provide companionship for recreational, 'non-cultural' and non-task-orientated activities.

Many argue, that the amount of social support, rather than who provides it is more important. Thus Pantelidou and Craig (2006) found the quality of social support significantly reduced culture shock in Greek migrant students. Others, however, place more emphasis on the *source* of support and its functions of social support. Thus help from a host-national network is important because through it foreign students can learn the social skills of their culture of sojourn. Help from the co-national network is important

because through it foreign students can maintain their culture of origin. The theory predicts that the well-being of foreign students depends on them having access to both types of networks. However, the evidence suggests that most foreign students do not belong to a viable host-national network.

### Conclusion

Various patterns in the literature have begun to emerge. Although there are no grand theories attempting to explain this phenomenon, various concepts have been put forward to predict the quality, quantity and chronicity of sojourner distress through culture shock. One such concept is the *culture-distance concept*, which states simply that the absolute amount of difference or distance (defined both objectively and subjectively) between a sojourner's own and the host culture is directly proportionally related to the amount of stress or difficulty experienced. Another concept relates to social support and has been described as *the functional friendship model* which suggests that various friendship networks (host, bicultural and multicultural) serve important psychological functions, which in turn help a sojourner over numerous difficulties.

Once again, studies highlighted both intra- and inter-individual factors that related to sojourner adjustment. Psychological research into sojourner adjustment to culture shock is comparatively new. Large-scale, multi-factorial, longitudinal studies, which are theory-derived, may help

considerably to identify the problems of increasing numbers of sojourners the world over. It is a complex and difficult area in which to do good academic research one of increasing importance as geographic mobility increases all around the world.

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