

Understanding your Own Culture & Cultural Adjustment

Are you Chinese-American, Mexican-American, German-American, or perhaps not American at all? How do you identify yourself? Whoever you are, however you define yourself, you will have "cultural baggage" wherever you go. What is cultural baggage you may ask? It consists of the assumptions that you have about yourself, your family, friends and the world based on your own experience. Cultural baggage can weigh you down at times, but it can also be used as a resource to help you through uncomfortable situations. Understanding your own cultural baggage will help you in the quest to understand someone else's.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN CULTURE

Most likely your basic view of yourself may be, for example, that you are good, or that at least you have good intentions. As you meet peoples of the world, you are excited and eager for the experience to energize you. It may be a shock to meet with confrontation because you are who you are, especially if you are U.S. American. How difficult to be confronted with seemingly unexpected and hard questions. When faced with confrontations, it may feel as though you are being attacked personally and criticized. Furthermore, as you spend more time in your host country, you will begin to recognize cultural patterns that are different from your own. These cultural patterns include differences in style, assumptions, values, cultural norms, perception, motivation, forms of achievement, methods of confrontation, personalization, and the list goes on and on. These differences are just the tip of the iceberg and will be addressed more in-depth in the next section. However, it is important to recognize your own culture's patterns and what they mean to you.

The next section describes U.S. American cultural patterns. If you are not from the United States, think about how these patterns compare with yours.

AMERICAN CULTURAL PATTERNS

Dr. L Robert Kohls, Director of Global Program Services at San Francisco State University, is a renowned literary contributor to the research on cultural patterns. He has developed a list of 13 commonly held values which help explain to first-time visitors to the United States why U.S. Americans act as they do. He is careful to avoid labeling these values positive or negative. As a U.S. American, do you recognize these traits in yourself? Whether you agree with Kohls or not, his observations are thought-provoking.

Personal control over the environment

Americans do not believe in fate, and they look at people who do as being backward, primitive, or "native." In the American context, to be "fatalistic" is to be superstitious, lazy, or unwilling to take initiative. Everyone should have control over whatever in the environment might potentially affect him or her. Americans attribute problems as coming from laziness or unwillingness to take responsibility in pursuing a better life, rather than due to simple bad luck or "fate."

Change seen as natural and positive
In the American mind, change is seen as indisputably good, leading to development, improvement, and progress. Many older, more traditional cultures consider change

disruptive and destructive; instead they value stability, continuity, tradition, and a rich and ancient heritage, none of which are considered very important in the United States.

Time and its control

Time is of utmost importance to most Americans. It is something to be on, kept, filled, saved, used, spent, wasted, lost, gained, planned, given, even killed. Americans are more concerned with getting things accomplished on time than they are with developing interpersonal relations. Their lives seem controlled by the little machines they wear on their wrists, cutting their discussions off abruptly to make their next appointment on time. This philosophy has enabled Americans to be extremely productive, and productivity is highly valued in their country.

Equality and fairness

Equality is so cherished in the U.S. that it is seen as having a religious basis. Americans believe that all people are "created equal" and that all should have an equal opportunity to succeed. This concept of equality is strange to seven-eighths of the world that view status and authority as desirable, even if they happen to be near the bottom of the social order. Since Americans like to treat foreigners "just like anybody else," newcomers to the U.S. should realize that no insult or personal indignity is intended if they are treated in a less-than-deferential manner by waiters in restaurants, clerks in stores and hotels, taxi drivers, and other service personnel.

Individualism and independence

Americans view themselves as highly individualistic in their thoughts and actions. They resist being thought of as representatives of any homogeneous group. When they do join groups, they believe they are special, just a little different from other members of the same group. In the U.S., you will find people freely expressing a variety of opinions anywhere and anytime. In spite of this "independence," almost all Americans end up voting for one of their two major political parties. Individualism leads to privacy, which Americans see as desirable. The word "privacy" does not exist in many non-Western languages. If it does, it is likely to have a negative connotation, suggesting loneliness or forced isolation. It is not uncommon for Americans to say, and even to believe: "If I don't have half an hour a day to myself, I go stark-raving mad!"

Self-help/initiative

Americans take credit only for what they accomplish as individuals. They get no credit for having been born into a rich family but pride themselves in having climbed the ladder of success, to whatever level, all by themselves. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. It's an indicator of how highly Americans regard the "self-made" man or woman.

Competition

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual in any system. Value is reflected in the economic system of "free enterprise" and it is applied in the U.S. in all areas - medicine, the arts, education, and sports.

Future orientation

Americans value the future and the improvements the future will surely bring. They devalue the past and are, to a large extent, unconscious of the present. Even a happy present goes largely unnoticed because Americans are hopeful that the future will bring even greater happiness. Since Americans believe that humans, not fate, can and should control the environment, they are good at planning short-term projects. This ability has caused Americans to be invited to all corners of the Earth to plan, and often achieve, the miracles, which their goal-setting methods can produce.

Action/work orientation

"Don't just stand there," says a typical bit of American advice, "do something!" This expression, though normally used in a crisis situation, in a sense describes most Americans' waking life, where action - any action - is seen as superior to inaction. Americans routinely schedule an extremely active day. Any relaxation must be limited in time and aimed at "recreating" so that they can work harder once their "recreation" is over. Such a "no-nonsense" attitude toward life has created a class of people known as "workaholics" - people addicted to, and often wholly identified with, their profession. The first question people often ask when they meet each other in the U.S. is related to work: "What do you do?" "Where do you work?" or "Who (what company) are you with?" The United States may be one of the few countries in the world where people speak about the "dignity of human labor," meaning hard physical labor. Even corporation presidents will engage in physical labor

from time to time and, in doing so, gain rather than lose respect from others.

Informality

Americans are even more informal and casual than their close relatives, the Western Europeans. For example, American bosses often urge their employees to call them by their first names and feel uncomfortable with the title "Mr." or "Mrs." Dress is another area where American informality is most noticeable, perhaps even shocking. For example, one can go to a symphony performance in any large American city and find people dressed in blue jeans. Informality is also apparent in Americans greetings. The more formal "How are you?" has largely been replaced with an informal "Hi!" This greeting is likely used with one's superior or with one's best friend.

Directness/openness/honesty

Many countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic ways of informing others of unpleasant information. Americans prefer the direct approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluations, and to consider anything other than the most direct and open approach to be "dishonest" and "insincere." Anyone in the U.S. who uses an intermediary to deliver the message will also be considered "manipulative" and "untrustworthy." If you come from a country where saving face is important, be assured that Americans are not trying to make you lose face with their directness.

Practicality/efficiency

Americans have a reputation for being realistic, practical, and efficient. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making important decisions. Americans pride themselves in not being very philosophically or theoretically oriented. If Americans would even admit to having a philosophy, it would probably be that of pragmatism. Will it make money? What is the "bottom line?" What can I gain from this activity? These are the kinds of questions Americans are likely to ask, rather than: Is it aesthetically pleasing? Will it be enjoyable? Will it advance the cause of knowledge? This pragmatic orientation has caused Americans to contribute more inventions to the world than any other country in human history. The love of "practicality" has also caused Americans to view some professions more favorably than others. Management and economics are much more popular in the United States than philosophy or anthropology, and law and medicine more valued than the arts. Americans belittle "emotional" and "subjective" evaluations in favor of "rational" and "objective" assessments. Americans try to avoid being "too sentimental" in making their decisions. They judge every situation "on its own merits.'

Materialism/acquisitiveness

Foreigners consider Americans more materialistic than they are likely to consider themselves. Americans would like to think that their material objects are just the "natural benefits" that result from hard work and serious intent - a reward, which all people could enjoy were they as industrious and hard-working as Americans. But by any standard,

Americans are materialistic. They give a higher priority to obtaining, maintaining, and protecting material objects than they do in developing and enjoying relationships with other people. Since Americans value newness and innovation, they sell or throw away possessions frequently and replace them with newer ones. A car may be kept for only two or three years, a house for five or six before buying a new one.

DEALING WITH ANTI-AMERICAN CRITICISM

As expressed previously, you probably consider yourself to be a good person, or at least someone with good intentions. But as you meet people outside of the United States, you will begin to discover that others don't always think that way. In fact, you must be prepared for confrontation based on what and who you are, to be judged not for yourself at times, but rather as for being a member of a collective body of people who live south of Canada and north of Mexico.

The forms of confrontation may vary; sometimes you will be expected to answer questions about American politics, geography, values, and other issues as if you were the #1 expert on the subject. At other times, criticism will simply be words yelled in your face. *With few exceptions, would you expect to ever be confronted with actual physical harm.* Some common questions that study abroad students have faced in the past are:

- Why do Americans call the Palestinians "terrorists," and the Contras "freedom fighters"?
- Why do Americans think it is okay to kidnap someone from another country and bring them to America to be tried in court?
- Why are Americans so materialistic? Why are they so wasteful of natural resources?
- Why are Americans so racist? How can you justify forcing the Native Americans onto reservations when the whole country belongs to them?
- Why are Americans so ignorant of other countries?
- Why does America give so much foreign aid to countries that abuse human rights?
- Why are there so many homeless people in "the richest country in the world"?
- Why are teachers so poorly paid in a county that claims to have one of the best educational systems?

STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO ANTI-AMERICAN CRITICISM

There is no one right or wrong way to respond to slurs made against the United States or you for being American. You will have your own method for dealing with confrontation based on your experiences, your way of dealing with conflict, and your opinions. You may choose to take an active role, and respond to the questions or accusations, or you may choose to take a passive role and not say anything in response. As you begin to respond to any criticism, keep the following strategies in mind:

Try to understand the critic's motive(s)

Americans are fond of saying 'don't judge a book by its cover.' Outward appearances are not always enough to go on in a situation where you are being confronted with anti-American sentiment. Try and talk to your "accuser" and ask questions that elicit this person's beliefs about the United States and why s/he might hold them. Does this person get ideas from the media? Movies? Television? Is this something being taught in school? Has an American harassed this person? If you understand the critic's motive(s), or from where his or her information comes, perhaps you can find some common ground and a more tolerant way to respond.

Draw upon personal experiences and observations

When someone asks you a question like, "Why are Americans so wasteful of natural resources?" your first response might be to say: "Oh, not me." Whether or not the question is based on fact, one way to respond might be to draw on your own experiences and observations. In this case, you can say that while you cannot speak for the rest of the American population, you have your own personal practices, such as recycling, water conservation or use of public transportation.

Avoid becoming defensive in their presence

You sometimes can't help becoming defensive - you are, after all, an American. Try avoiding getting defensive as much as possible. Keep an open mind, and remember to try and understand your critic's motives.

Become more familiar with common U.S. facts and policies

‘Americans are uneducated.’ That is a common belief overseas. How can you dispel that stereotype? ‘Why don’t you know who the Secretary of State is?’ People in other countries will probably ask you a lot of questions about the United States, on such varied topics as geography, politics, pop culture, etc. They may be intelligent questions like, ‘Who decides whether a person is guilty of a crime?’ or they may be more like, ‘Does every American wear cowboy boots and ride a horse?’ It is not uncommon to find that people overseas know a lot more about U.S. politics and policies than you do. You should familiarize yourself with basic U.S. facts and policies because you do not want to be considered uneducated or ignorant. Some areas of suggestion are:

- U.S. geography (e.g., differences in regions)
- U.S. political system (e.g., how does Congress differ from the Senate)
- U.S. judicial system (e.g., how does the jury system work ‘in theory’)
- U.S. foreign policy (especially how it applies to your host country)

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

When you first walk off the plane, you might look around and see this: γφηκγ φη δγδλ νπξου ρεγ. If you are studying in Greece that may be okay, but for most of you, as panic sets in, your first thought might be to turn around and hop back on the 20,000 ton mechanical bird that has just brought you to this strange land. For others, you may feel a sense of great excitement, of eagerness to ‘begin,’ whatever that might mean to you. And for a handful of you returning to a place

where you've been before, stepping off the plane might bring a sense of homecoming. As time goes by and you settle into your routine, register for classes, begin the process of making friends and explore the area you now call home, you will be going through many emotional, psychological, and possibly, physical changes. This is what is known as ‘cultural adjustment’ or ‘cultural adaptation.’ You cannot avoid these changes, but as long as you recognize them when they occur, you will be better prepared to deal with their consequences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINING ‘CULTURE’

It is difficult to begin a discussion on cultural adjustment without first defining the word "culture" and what makes culture. According to *American Heritage Dictionary*, culture is defined as "the arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought created by a people or group at a particular time." If you were to ask several different people what they thought culture meant, you might get a list like L. Robert Kholts did when he wrote *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*:

- manners and customs
- beliefs and ideas
- ceremonies and rituals
- laws (written & unwritten)
- ideas and thought patterns
- language
- arts and artifacts
- social institutions
- religious beliefs
- myths & legends
- knowledge
- values and morals
- concept of self
- accepted ways of behaving

Kohls found that people were describing the total way of life of any group of people. And to complicate matters, everyone has their own personal culture. Yours may be your preference for cowboy boots over sneakers, or rap music over classical. In short, there is no one correct list of components of culture, but at least you can get a sense of what makes up culture.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

As described in the beginning, cultural adjustment is a continuous, on-going process. It never stops, and it varies from one individual to another and from one culture to another. The end process nearly always results in both a change in the individual and the setting. Your own personal adjustment process may require you to confront not only differences in the new culture but it may also force you to take a good look at your own cultural values and practices.

The concept of adjustment implies change. In cross-cultural adjustment one is concerned with the changes in thinking and behavior required when moving from one cultural environment to another. In your case, you will be moving from your own culture to one overseas. The nature of your adjustment required depends on the nature of the differences between your original culture and the new one and on the objectives you seek to complete in the new culture. The concept of adjustment assumes that you already have well-established sets of behaviors for "operating" in your own culture. As you enter into new cultures, those patterns of behavior may no longer satisfy your needs. In developing new patterns of coping with your new environment, you may

experience varying degrees of disorientation and discomfort. This is called 'culture shock.'

CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is not quite as shocking or as sudden as most people expect. It is part of the process of learning a new culture that, as you have learned already, is called 'cultural adaptation.' A definition of culture shock is:

"The feeling of frustration and anxiety which arises when familiar cultural cues are suddenly removed and replaced by new and seemingly bizarre behavior."

- Lewis and Jugman, *On Being Foreign*

You may experience some discomfort before you are able to function well in the new setting. This discomfort is the 'culture shock' stage of the adaptation process. The main thing to remember is that this is a very normal process that nearly everyone goes through.

Just as you will bring with you overseas clothes and other personal items, you will also carry invisible 'cultural baggage' when you travel, as was discussed in the previous chapter. That baggage is not as obvious as the items in your suitcases, but it will play a major role in your adaptation abroad. Cultural baggage contains the values that are important to you and the patterns of behavior that are customary in your culture. The more you know about your personal values and how they are derived from your culture, the better prepared you will be to see and understand the cultural differences you will encounter abroad.

Anticipating future events and possibilities makes it easier to deal with them when they happen. For example, it helps to anticipate your initial departure and plan ways to maintain relationships with people at home while you are away. Be sure to allow ample time to say goodbye to all the people who are important to you, and plan how to keep in touch. This assures people that you will continue to care about them.

Planning to stay in touch does not require a promise to write or telephone on a strict schedule, but it does help to establish a realistic interval between communications. You will be extremely busy getting settled and learning about your new environment, so it is essential that long periods between communications not alarm your family and friends at home.

Some surprises always await you when you arrive in a new place. People may walk and talk more quickly, traffic patterns may be confusing, and buildings may look different than expected. Such differences are easy to see and quickly learned. The housing arrangements at your university or college, the manner in which classes are taught, registration for courses, and other procedures may seem strange or very confusing. The international student office is often the best place to go for help with such matters.

Studying abroad, however, means making big changes in your daily life. Generations of students have found that they go through a predictable series of stages as they adjust to living abroad. At first, although the new situation is a bit

confusing, most students also find it to be exhilarating, a time of new experiences, sights, sounds, and activities. With so much to learn and absorb in the new culture, the initial period of settling in often seems like an adventure. During this time, you will tend to look for and identify similarities between your home culture and your host culture. You will find that people really are friendly and helpful. The procedures are different, but there are patterns, things that you can learn and depend on. You may classify other aspects of the culture that seem unusual or even unattractive as curious, interesting, or 'quaint.' There will be many opportunities to meet people in your community; such opportunities can be rewarding, but they also present an expanded array of cultural puzzles.

Gradually, as you become more involved in activities and get to know the people around you, differences - rather than similarities - will become increasingly apparent to you. Those differences may begin to seem more irritating than interesting or quaint. Small incidents and difficulties may make you anxious and concerned about how best to carry on with academic and social life. As these differences emerge, they can be troubling and sometimes shocking. But culture shock does not happen all at once. It is a feeling that grows little by little as you interact with other students, faculty, and people in the community.

For many this gradual process culminates in an emotional state known as 'culture shock,' although it is seldom as dramatic as the term implies. The common symptoms of culture shock are:

- Extreme homesickness
- Desire to avoid social settings which seem threatening or unpleasant
- Physical complaints and sleep disturbances
- Depression and feelings of helplessness
- Difficulty with coursework and concentration
- Loss of your sense of humor
- Boredom or fatigue
- Hostility towards the host culture
- Decide how you can apply what you have learned the next time you find yourself in a similar situation.
- Be open-minded and flexible.

Throughout the period of cultural adaptation, take good care of yourself. Read a book or rent a video in your home language, take a short trip if possible, exercise and get plenty of rest, write a letter or telephone home, eat good food, and do things you enjoy with friends. Take special notice of things you enjoy about living in the host culture.

Students are sometimes unaware of the fact that they are experiencing culture shock when these symptoms occur. There are ways to deal with this period of culture shock, so it helps to recognize that culture shock may lie behind physical symptoms and irritability.

COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

The most effective way to combat culture shock is to step back from a given event that has bothered you, assess it, and search for an appropriate explanation and response. Try the following:

- Observe how others are acting in the same situation.
- Describe the situation, what it means to you, and your response to it.
- Ask a local resident or someone with extensive experience how they would have handled the situation and what it means in the host culture.
- Plan how you might act in this or similar situations in the future.
- Test the new behavior and evaluate how well it works.

Although it can be disconcerting and a little scary, the 'shock' gradually eases as you begin to understand the new culture. It is useful to realize that often the reactions and perceptions of others toward you - and you toward them - are not personal evaluations but are based on a clash of cultural values. The more skilled you become in recognizing how and when cultural values and behaviors are likely to come in conflict, the easier it becomes to make adjustments that can help you avoid serious difficulties.

'WILL I LOSE MY OWN CULTURE?'

Sometimes students worry about 'losing their culture' if they become too well adapted to the host culture. Don't worry: it is virtually impossible to lose the culture in which you were raised. In fact, learning about the new culture often increases your appreciation for and understanding of your own culture. Don't resist the opportunity to become bicultural, able to function competently in two cultural environments.

Just as culture shock derives from the accumulation of cultural clashes, so an accumulation of small successes can lead to more effective interactions within the new culture. As you increase your abilities to manage and understand the new social system, practices that recently seemed so strange will become less puzzling. Eventually you will adapt sufficiently to do your best in your studies and social life and to relax and fully enjoy the experience. And you will recover your sense of humor!

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Perhaps the major contributor to unease in a foreign environment is the increased difficulty, or even impossibility, of communicating what you wish to communicate and of receiving the information you wish to receive. You will bring your own communication habits, both verbal and non-verbal, that sometimes do not transcend cultural limits. Studies of intercultural communication have shown that the amount of time and energy needed for simple communication increases rather dramatically as cultural differences increase. Your own gestures and other non-verbal cues can act, unbeknownst to you, as hindrances to communication. Your perceptions of any given person or situation can be quite different from the other person's perception.

You should try and recognize that other cultures may use different verbal and non-verbal communication methods. Body language, the use of 'personal space' when talking and other non-verbal communication can be very different than what you are used to in the United States.

Likewise, some cultures are not nearly as frank, sarcastic or confrontational when discussing certain topics. Sometimes things are implied in conversation but not voiced. It is important to remember that differences in communication styles are just that - different. You should avoid making judgments about a person's rudeness (or lack thereof) until you understand how verbal and non-verbal communication styles differ in your host culture. You will also be studied and possibly judged by your own communication styles.

IMPOSITION OF PERSONAL VALUES

The tendency of people to impose their own values and assumptions onto people in the new culture usually inhibits cross-cultural understanding. While you are abroad you should avoid making definitive, prejudicial judgments that may result from your own cultural responses. For example, it is best not to move rapidly to the conclusion that a native of the new culture is "cheating" or "lying," when that person's behavior may be the result of other motives. You should be open-minded, receptive to different ideas, concepts and behaviors. A certain amount of 'cultural self-analysis' might reveal much about your own motivations and value system; such knowledge can contribute to increased communication skills, increased acceptance and understanding of others, and more productive interaction. Until you have acquired enough self-knowledge to realize the true extent to which your outward personality is shaped by cultural habits and values, you will not be completely capable of comprehending or learning

from the cultural habits and values of a different society.

INFLUENCE OF TIME WITHIN A NEW CULTURE

Cross-cultural adaptation is a continuing process, with continuous evolution of insights, knowledge, physical skills and emotional skills. Of course, it is possible to live for years in a new culture and never be affected by it; but those involved in cross-cultural adjustment never cease to learn from the experience. It is important for you to be flexible with newfound knowledge, to be prepared to discover that any single piece of information might not have universal applicability in the culture. Language-learning provides an example: you will often learn new words or terms and then, until you learn more, you may use that new vocabulary in inappropriate situations.

It is also possible to misunderstand cultural generalities and misapply the generalization. A non-American, perhaps, after perceiving with some difficulty that 'Americans are frank,' may misapply the insight and behave rudely in a given situation. One possible reaction you might have to living for some length of time in the new culture is withdrawing from it, isolating yourself from the most threatening aspects of the culture, and perhaps clinging to people from and material representations of your own culture. Another possible reaction is to view negatively all aspects of the new culture, to belittle it, to consider its norms and values inferior to your own culture.

A more positive reaction is to assume or take on many of the new culture's norms; especially those involved in expressing

yourself to others both in image and language. As the length of time in the new culture grows, your ability to learn from your experiences should increase, as should your awareness of your own culturally influenced assumptions and of your personal motivations and value systems.