

THE FIVE STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK

Critical Incidents Around the World

Paul Pedersen

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Preface

Culture shock is a profoundly personal experience. It does not affect all people in the same way or even the same person in the same way when it reoccurs. The critical incidents reported in the following chapters will describe what students on a voyage around the world experienced as they changed in response to the different countries and cultures they encountered. Not all of the students were aware of going through culture shock, but they were very much aware of cultural differences and, in some cases, of cultural similarities as well.

Culture shock happens inside each individual who encounters unfamiliar events and unexpected circumstances. This book will define culture shock as an internalized construct or perspective developed in reaction or response to the new or unfamiliar situation. As the situation changes in unexpected directions, the individual needs to construct new perspectives on self, others, and the environment that "fit" with the new situation. Because culture shock is such a subjective response to unfamiliar situations, it was necessary to provide many different examples for each stage of culture shock across each country setting. The variety of examples demonstrates that culture shock: (1) is a process and not a single event, (2) may take place at many different levels simultaneously as the individual interacts with a complex environment, (3) becomes stronger or weaker as the individual learns to cope or fails to cope, (4) teaches the individual new coping strategies which contribute to future success, and (5) applies to any radical change presenting unfamiliar or unexpected circumstances. Situations of culture shock abroad provide metaphors for better understanding culture shock related to physical health, environmental disaster, economic failure, psychological crises, or any radical change in lifestyle.

The first chapter will introduce the published literature about culture shock indicating what we know and what we do not know about that experience. There is a great deal of disagreement about culture shock and how it presents itself. Some of the publications even discount the construct "culture shock" as a useful concept. The critical incidents were organized according to the stages

of culture shock the student author seemed to be experiencing. At the end of each critical incident, the primary "insight" that related that incident to a particular stage of culture shock will be indicated. The reader may well find other insights in each incident that would relate to other stages of culture shock, given the complexity of each cross-cultural encounter.

Critical incidents were chosen for several reasons. First, they provide firsthand accounts of persons going through culture shock while they are in the process of adapting and changing. Second, each incident provides a specific example of a student author's encounter with other cultures. Third, cross-sectional examples demonstrate a change in emphasis distinguishing one stage from another in a growth toward multicultural awareness. Fourth, the critical incidents provide valuable examples for discussion and learning about multicultural awareness by the reader. Fifth, the incidents incorporate the complexity of cross-cultural encounters, through storytelling.

This book is different in several ways from other books about culture shock. First, this book describes a qualitative rather than a quantitative perspective of the experiences of culture shock. Second, the emphasis is on internalized changes in the students as they meet many different cultures and nationalities rather than on matching the student with a single culture over a period of time. Third, the many different examples of culture shock described in each chapter highlight the different ways in which student authors experienced culture shock. Fourth, no attempt is made to provide "right answers" to the dilemma in each critical incident; the emphasis is placed instead on the consequences of alternative decisions.

The critical incidents described in this book were limited to outside-the-classroom experiences. None of the incidents relating to the shipboard teaching were included. It was a decision of the author to focus exclusively on the encounters students had with host country nationals or one another in host country settings because this is one of the more unique opportunities available in the Semester at Sea. The critical incidents described in this book therefore describe only one part of the Semester at Sea experience. At the same time many students were able to relate academic concepts from shipboard classes to the critical incidents ashore as meaningful and practical tools for managing culture shock.

The student authors of the critical incidents were participating in three psychology classes aboard the Semester at Sea *Universe* during the spring semester 1992 voyage around the world conducted by the Institute for Shipboard Education, University of Pittsburgh. The ports visited were Nassau, Bahamas; Caracas, Venezuela; San Salvador, Brazil; Cape Town, South Africa; Mombasa, Kenya; Madras, India; Penang, Malaysia; Hong Kong; Keelung, Taiwan, Republic of China; Kobe, Japan; and, finally, Seattle, Washington, United States of America. Each student in the three psychology classes was required to submit eight critical incidents. Only those incidents by student authors who gave their written permission to let their critical incidents

be used in this book were included. The incidents included were selected from 664 incidents. Confidentiality was protected for these critical incidents described in this book by changing personal names into pronouns and omitting other identifying features. The student authors will, however, have no difficulty finding their own critical incidents as they read through this book. The critical incidents selected demonstrated a clear learning insight, presented a unique perspective not duplicated by other incidents, and helped illustrate the dynamics of culture shock.

I want to thank the student authors who agreed to participate in this book project. The following individuals contributed critical incidents. Students in the course "Psychology of Personality" included Prescott Burke, Anouska Cardenas, Camille Collett, Amy Fehsenfeld, Mara Goodman, Ana Gracie, Jason Green, Vincente Grosso, Bonnie Hagan, Alison Haugo, Scott Horowitz, Laurie Hsu, Kiley Johnson, Abigail Leeder, Matthew Mattia, Shanon Melick, Matthew Miller, John Norwood, Kimberly Olszak, Jason Ostrowski, Caroline Pacha, Stephanie Pinola, Jenifer Porter, Sabine Rice, Rachel Rosen, Stacy Sadler, Joshua Seymour, Amy Smith, Kristen Stewart, Susan Wadsworth, Sherwood Wagner, and Annette Zeller.

Students in the course "Small Groups" included Susan Anderson, Cynthia Barsotti, Elizabeth Beattie, Molly Benson, Susan Bratman, Kevin Comiskey, John Dalton, Mollie Eaton, Darcy Feuerzeig, Mara Goodman, Shari Liebermensch, Mark Liff, David Martin, Jessica Martin, Hilary Pfau, April Prohaska, Gregory Queen, Lori Slicker, Tonya Ward, Brett Weiss, Elizabeth Whilden, and Catherine Wilson.

Students in the course "Personality and Social Structure" included Susan Anderson, Erica Bamdas, Barbara Bersche, Kristen Bonesteel, Jerry Coggan, Meghan Dillon, Andrea Drioli, Mollie Eaton, Kori Eldean, Sara Fretzin, Leslie Gill, Ruth Griesen, Michelle Harper, Tia Hoppin, Nicole Jackson, Caroline Jasper, Cathryn Marsico, Karen Michaels, Dona Ring, Jeffrey Rogoff, Jennifer Stack, Megann Vahey, Leander Ward, Jessica Waters, Melinda Watkins, Allison Wells, Laura Yearout, and Marianne Zyla.

I would like to dedicate this book to Mr. Chao-Yung Tung and to his family who have invested in the future by more than twenty years of emotional and financial support to the idea of shipboard university education. Their support has directly benefitted the twenty thousand students who have experienced their Semester at Sea, and indirectly benefitted many times that number of us, for which we are truly grateful.

When I returned from the voyage, some of my colleagues jokingly asked me if I had enjoyed my "vacation" or "the cruise" implying that the Semester at Sea was not a serious venture. I would smile politely and ask them in return to describe to me any one of their undergraduate university courses. Almost none of them were able to identify a single outstanding course in their undergraduate education that was particularly meaningful to them. I then suggested to them that all of the students who had experienced the Semester at

Sea will vividly remember for the rest of their lives the courses they took and the specific insights they gained. If the purpose of education is "remembered learning," then the Semester at Sea provides a very important example of educational development.

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About the Author

PAUL PEDERSEN is professor of education in the department of counseling and human services at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. He has authored and edited a number of books, including *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Counseling and Therapy* (Greenwood, 1985), and with Allen Ivey, *Culture-Centered Counseling and Interviewing Skills* (Praeger, 1993).

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Experiencing Culture Shock

Because it is so subjective, the experience of culture shock is hard to convey in rows of numbers or even statistically significant general tendencies of "most" people. This book will focus on the experience of culture shock as described by undergraduate college students visiting different countries around the world. What do people say when they are going through culture shock? What do they feel? What do they think? This book will answer some of those questions in the students' own words as they describe the critical incidents that happened to them in culturally different settings.

Culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment. This psychological construct of culture shock has been used to describe the adjustment process in its emotional, psychological, behavioral, cognitive, and physiological impact on individuals. In a multicultural context, culture shock is a more or less sudden immersion into a nonspecific state of uncertainty where the individuals are not certain what is expected of them or of what they can expect from the persons around them. The term of culture shock was first introduced by Kalvero Oberg (1960) to describe the anxiety resulting from not knowing what to do in a new culture. The familiar cues have been removed or have been given a different meaning, resulting in responses ranging from a vague discomfort to profound disorientation. The recent literature recognizes that culture shock applies to any new situation, job, relationship, or perspective requiring a role adjustment and a new identity. In a broader and more general sense, culture-shock applies to any situation where an individual is forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies.

There are at least six indicators that a culture-shock adjustment is taking place. First, familiar cues about how the person is supposed to behave are missing, or the familiar cues now have a different meaning. Second, values the person considered good, desirable, beautiful, and valuable are no longer respected by the hosts. Third, the disorientation of culture shock creates an emotional state of anxiety, depression, or hostility, ranging from a mild

uneasiness to the "white furies" of unreasonable and uncontrollable rage attributed to colonials in the last century by indigenous peoples. Fourth, there is a dissatisfaction with the new ways and an idealization of "the way things were." Fifth, recovery skills that used to work before no longer seem to work. Sixth, there is a sense that this culture shock discrepancy is permanent and will never go away.

Experiencing a new culture is a sudden and sometimes unpleasant feeling causing persons to reevaluate both the new host and their own home culture. Until recently, culture shock was assumed to be a consistently negative experience, much like an illness or disease. Oberg (1960) mentioned six negative aspects of culture shock including: (1) strain resulting from the effort of psychological adaptation, (2) a sense of loss or deprivation referring to the removal of former friends, status, role, and/or possessions, (3) rejection by or rejection of the new culture, (4) confusion in the role definition, role expectations, feelings, and self-identity, (5) unexpected anxiety, disgust, or indignation regarding cultural differences between the old and new ways, and (6) feelings of helplessness as a result of not coping well in the new environment.

Others have applied Oberg's framework more broadly to include "culture fatigue" (Guthrie, 1975), "language shock" (Smalley, 1963), "role shock" (Byrnes, 1966), and "pervasive ambiguity" (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Each of these early definitions has conveyed the meaning of culture shock as a reactive state of specific pathology or deficit which is both the source and result of alienation in a new culture according to the "medical model." More recent explanations of culture shock have emphasized the "educational model," describing the adjustment period as a state of growth and development which--however painful it might be--may result in positive and even essential insights.

Several different paradigms that are used to describe culture shock are surveyed in this chapter. Later we will describe what was learned from the accounts of students participating in this study which contribute toward a unique and different definition of culture shock.

THE STAGE THEORY OF CULTURE SHOCK

S. Lysgaard (1955) first developed the U-curve hypothesis to describe the adjustment patterns of international students in a host culture. Oberg (1958) described seven stages of adjustment: (1) incubation stage, (2) crises resulting from normal daily activity, (3) understanding the host culture, (4) objective viewing of the host culture, (5) reentry, (6) reverse culture shock, and (7) readjustment to the home country. The initial U-curve adjustment was broadened to a W-curve by J. T. Gullahorn and J. E. Gullahorn (1963) who pointed out how the adjustment process on returning home resembled the original adjustment process abroad. F. Brown (1989) reviews previous stage

theories emphasizing the importance of describing adjustment episodes in a context.

Peter Adler (1975) has specified the process and sequence of stages in the culture shock experience based on work by Oberg and others. This approach describes culture shock in more neutral rather than negative terms as a five-stage educational and developmental process with positive as well as negative consequences.

The first stage of initial contact, or the "honeymoon stage," is where the newly arrived individual experiences the curiosity and excitement of a tourist, but where the person's basic identity is rooted in the back-home setting.

The second stage involves disintegration of the old familiar cues, and the individual is overwhelmed by the new culture's requirements. The individual typically experiences self-blame and a sense of personal inadequacy for any difficulties encountered.

The third stage involves a reintegration of new cues and an increased ability to function in the new culture. The emotions associated with this stage are typically anger and resentment toward the new culture as having caused difficulties and being less adequate than the old familiar ways. Because of this outer-directed anger, persons in this stage of culture shock are difficult to help.

The fourth stage continues the process of reintegration toward gradual autonomy and increased ability to see the bad and good elements in both the old and the new cultures. A balanced perspective emerges that helps the person interpret both the previous home and the new host cultures.

The fifth stage is described as reciprocal interdependence, where the person has ideally achieved biculturalism, or has become fluently comfortable in both the old and the new cultures. There is some controversy about whether this stage is an unreachable ideal or whether persons actually can achieve this stage of multiculturalism.

There are other stage theories of culture shock as well. S. O. Lesser and H. W. S. Peter (1957) developed a three-stage process of culture shock, including first, a spectator phase on arrival; second, an involvement phase when the person can no longer stand outside the host culture and must become involved; and third, a coming-to-terms phase where the visitor learns how to cope in the host culture. I. Torbiorn (1982) based his four-stage description on (1) the tourist phase, (2) the culture-shock phase, (3) the conformist phase, and (4) the assimilation phase. Although there are differences across the description of stages, the description of culture shock as a stage-based developmental process is shared by most of the persons writing about the culture-shock experience.

This sequence of stages or steps has been referred to as a U-curve, in which the adjustment process moves from a higher and more adequate level through a lower and less adequate level toward a return to the higher and more adequate level of coping in the new culture or cultures. A. T. Church (1982) discusses eleven empirical studies in support of the U-curve hypothesis. These

data support the general hypothesis but not full recovery to the original level of positive functioning back home. Five other studies failed to confirm the U-curve hypothesis, indicating that there was no cross-sectional support for the five-stage thesis. In spite of the lack of clear empirical evidence, there is much support for the U-curve as a convenient model for describing culture shock. Because culture shock is subjectively complex, it is difficult to measure accurately.

A. Furnham and S. Bochner (1986) discuss several problems in the U-curve hypothesis about culture shock. First, there are many dependent variables to consider as aspects of adjustment, such as depression, loneliness, homesickness, and other attitudes. Second, the definition of a U-shape is uneven in the research literature that tested this hypothesis because different persons start out at different levels of original adjustment adequacy and then change at different rates. Furnham and Bochner suggest that research should focus on the interpersonal rather than the intrapersonal variables to study the process of culture shock.

The most serious weakness of a U-curve or a W-curve design is the implication of a smooth linear adaptive process, which is quite different from reality. Transformation occurs through a series of degeneration and regeneration events or crises in a nonregular and erratic movement of change. Part of this process is conscious and other parts more unconscious as the visitor seeks greater success in the host environment. As the visitor's internal capacity to cope increases, the individual is able to handle the "stress and adaptation, learning and unlearning, acculturation and deculturation, crisis and resolution" (Kim, 1988, p.57).

There are many examples of U-shaped curves of adjustment in the psychological literature. These include adjustments to retirement, divorce, nursing careers, office jobs, college life, medical school, psychiatric residency, bereavement, economic change, paraplegia, and hemodialysis to name a few (Coffman and Harris, 1984). Some of the parallels between adjustment in these areas and culture shock fit more closely than others, but the typical sequence of events in each case is close enough to be generalizable.

No research to date has attempted to specify the relationships among the various facets of culture-shock in terms of their relative importance, the order in which culture-shock events are likely to occur, and which groups are more vulnerable to one or another type of culture shock (Furnham, 1988). Most of the research has been descriptive with few attempts to explain for whom the shock will be more or less intense or what determines each person's reaction, how long the culture shock is likely to last, and whether culture shock can be prevented.

THE DISEASE MODEL OF CULTURE SHOCK

The earliest descriptions of culture shock compared it to a disease that