Culture Shock

Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments

Adrian Furnham and Stephen Bochner

With a Foreword by Walter J. Lonner

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AND STEPHEN BOCHNER

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London and New York

First published in 1986 by
Methuen & Co. Ltd

Reprinted 1989, 1990
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the
USA and Canada by Routledge
a division of Routledge,
Chapman and Hall, Inc.

Set by Hope Services, Abingdon
Printed in Great Britain at the
University Press, Cambridge

*British Library Cataloguing in
Publication Data*

Furnham, Adrian
Culture shock: psychological
reactions to unfamiliar
environments.
1. Culture shock
I. Title II. Bochner, Stephen
155.9 GN517

*Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data*

Furnham, Adrian.
Culture shock.
Bibliography: p.
Includes indexes.
1. Culture shock.
I. Bochner, Stephen. II. Title.
GN517.F87 1986
303.4'82 86-8376

ISBN 0-415-04523-1

Acknowledgements

We are of course indebted to a number of people who have helped us and shaped our thinking on the topic of culture shock. These include Michael Bond (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Peter Collett and the late Jos Jaspars (Oxford University) who are to be thanked for useful conversations. Also we should mention the tireless efforts of Louise Kahabka and Vera Thompson in Sydney and Elsie Banham in London, who patiently retyped chapter after chapter. We are also indebted to the Australian Studies Centre at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies for providing the first author with a Commonwealth Visiting Fellowship so that he could discuss finer points of the book with the second author on a yacht in Sydney Harbour. Any responsibilities for errors, omissions, misjudgements may be attributed to a combination of the excellent white wine and the swell in Port Jackson.

ADRIAN FURNHAM
STEPHEN BOCHNER

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Foreword

When Professors Furnham and Bochner kindly invited me to write a foreword to this book, I was in a good setting to do so. I had recently arrived in Germany, where I was to spend nearly a year on a sabbatical leave from my university, with additional support from the Fulbright Program and German sources. My wife and three teenagers accompanied me. What better way to make comments about a book on adjustments to other cultures than during the process of a five-member family adapting to a set of other-culture circumstances? We also had the additional perspective of reflecting on our previous sabbatical, spent in Mexico seven years earlier, and comparing the two experiences.

While my wife, especially, and I were quite familiar with Europe in general and Germany in particular, our children were not. And even my wife and I were only slightly familiar with our sabbatical locale of the Saarland, a beautiful part of south-western Germany which has rich historical ties with France. Here my wife and I could monitor our own and each other's adjustment to the subtle nuances of subjective culture, and both of us could watch our apprehensive offspring absorb and accommodate a new culture and language. This family adventure was in part designed to help us see ourselves against the backdrop of a different culture – perhaps the last time we could do this while the children were still legally under our control. A bonus to this family and professional outing was, as mentioned above, how it could contribute to this foreword.

The manuscript did not reach me until after our return home, and that was an advantage. The delay gave me plenty of time to reflect on what I knew would be a central part of my comments: how helpful, in fact, can a book on culture shock be to those who are anticipating or even going through an experience where some degree of discomfort is expected? Or, how helpful might such a book be to those who are trying to aid others as they struggle with the problems of human adaptation to unfamiliar environments? A more general question was also of interest: because adaptation to any unfamiliar situation is highly dependent upon enormous variations in both situations and persons, is it possible to

develop a taxonomy or a set of guidelines which could embrace all these variations in a credible, consistent and beneficial way?

'You're off for a year of adventure!' These words are shouted from the cover of the *1984 Orientation Handbook* prepared by the Fulbright Commission (otherwise known as the Council for International Exchange of Scholars). The Fulbright people, world-wide, have had a lot of practice in helping to prepare professors, teachers, students and others to live abroad. They give tips about schools, shopping, common customs, medical procedures, characteristic cultural misunderstandings, and so forth, all based upon the experiences of hundreds of culture travellers that preceded them. In one of their unofficial publications they in fact devote a few pages to culture shock and explain its symptoms, phases and resolution. Summarized are the major features of Kalervo Oberg's description of 'culture shock', that well-worn and (like its time-orientated counterpart of 'future shock') perhaps frequently misused phrase which Oberg introduced into the English language, apparently in 1954. Oberg's catch-phrase was and continues to be interesting and very influential. Implied in its use is a sort of axiom that adjustment to another culture is assumed to follow a 'natural' course. The ebbing and flowing of exhilaration, anxiety, frustration, hostility, bewilderment, homesickness, denial, lethargy, and other reactions to situational stress, are supposed to subside and eventually settle into a calming sea of relative adjustment to, and acceptance of, the other culture as just another way of construing reality. In other words, we voluntarily or involuntarily confront an unfamiliar set of rules about how life should be lived, we eventually learn the rules, and we go on living happily, or maybe grudgingly, ever after. That is, until the next time. It's as simple as that, so it seems.

During the early part of our sabbatical, my wife would occasionally consult the Oberg reference. She enjoyed 'checking on where we were' with respect to our adjustment. While it was true that we slept longer than usual during our first two weeks, and that the children were justifiably anxious about attending school (they initially knew little German), I was convinced that Oberg's notion was only minimally relevant for our situation. After all, everyone seems to suffer a bit from jet-lag and the rigours of last-minute packing, and all children seem to have at least a little anxiety about school. How much of our reaction was really attributable to the stresses and strains of confronting another culture?

Smugly and with academic aplomb I insisted that we were not candidates for a valid case of culture shock. Some adjustments were necessary, of course, but actual *shock*? No, I demurred, 'shock' seems to imply something serious, like tonic immobility, and should therefore be reserved for the special case. We had plenty of things to cushion us against a text-book type of shock. For instance, my wife and I had visited

Germany several times and had even lived there for a combined total of about nine years. We actually felt at *home* there, much of the time. The language, especially for my wife, posed no serious problems, despite the fact that I am convinced that one can never *really* know a culture until one masters its language. Our multilingual friends and colleagues made it easier for us, as they do with most Americans, by speaking English. And we were well within the range of the American Forces Radio and Television Network, allowing us to tune in on mainstream America almost any time we wished. Our financial resources were quite satisfactory, allowing us to buy a new automobile. This is culture shock?

I argued that for Oberg's, or anyone else's, model of culture shock to work, we would have to be in a rather different set of other-culture circumstances, with stressors that challenged our adaptive resources. We could not be temporary sojourners, somewhat insulated from most anxiety-arousing circumstances and therefore inoculated against real stress, and expect to feel the full force of a classic case of culture shock. If we were to qualify as a text-book case of this debilitation, we could not be, as we were under our rather enviable circumstances in Germany, capable of almost immediate escape from nearly any unpleasant situation. I further argued that our experiences in Mexico much more closely approximated conditions which would permit the consideration of Oberg's original notion and the common use of 'culture shock'. It was there, on the Yucatan Peninsula, where we experienced significant discrepancies between social realities and our own well-learnt template of how things 'should be' between people and things and people and people.

Many things impressed and affected us in Mexico: the cheerful fatalism of very friendly people; abject poverty and occasional wealth; the Spanish language (which we could not handle as well as German), not to mention the infinitely more complex Mayan language; family and friendship patterns and customs that at times appeared baffling; collegiate relationships which were strained because of mutually desired but chronically unmet perfection in interpersonal interaction; the rush of the market-place, the hot and humid weather, the inability to comprehend fully the incredible accomplishments of the ancient Maya, the occasional resentment of 'rich Americanos', the unpredictability of the 'floating' peso, and so on. Worse yet, from a culture-shock perspective, but somehow strangely satisfying and memorable, were my experiences in a rural Mayan village. Things there were *really* different, and I was indeed a stranger in a strange land. And even more graphic were other experiences: short stays in places like Istanbul, Calcutta, Tokyo, Bogotá, where one gets a feel for truly striking cultural differences; where one is perhaps ill-equipped even to know how to look for the basic, whopping differences to which one would have to become adjusted if a semblance of psychological survival was to be expected.

As the weeks and months passed in Germany, I continued to ponder our relatively easy situation, and how it could not qualify as a very florid case of culture shock. The closest we got to the bouquet of emotions which surround culture shock involved an ugly legal hassle with our landlord; in that controversy our nearly complete ignorance of German rental laws and the court system made us appreciate the many things in Germany that we *did* understand. Amid our frequent feelings of helplessness, how empathetic we felt toward the millions of immigrants and other culture travellers who either had to understand local laws, but *quick*, or sink fast!

By the time we were ready to end our 'great adventure', I had developed a good case against culture shock as a unitary phenomenon and as a term that can be bandied around with the same ease that we use terms like 'measles', 'influenza', or even the related concept of 'fatigue'. My patient wife had long since stopped listening to the details of my rationale, and so when I could not get others (e.g. our well-adjusted children) to listen to my arguments, the dialogue was internal. The core of my argument was that culture shock has to be considered and understood as a complex and interactive phenomenon. Just as there is no fixed number of types of persons who are candidates for the unpleasant effects of culture shock, there is no set number of situations which reliably trigger this common problem of adaptation. One has to consider which person, which situation, which behaviour and which desired outcome. Subscribing generally to the social-learning paradigm(s) in psychology, I would tell those within earshot that every case of *everything* in the mammoth arena of human behaviour, including culture shock, has to be considered in the context of its own configuration of actors and settings. Categorizing people (for example, as catastrophizers, extroverts, independents) as well as types of situation (such as the academic sojourn, forced migration, ethnic segregation) works only to a limited extent. Beyond the point of limited explanatory power afforded by categories, one must consider the whole configuration – including the hard-to-measure subjective evaluation of the complete process as experienced by the 'victim'.

I explained to my wife that I now knew Furnham and Bochner's book would simply have to take into account these person-by-situation factors. A very wide-ranging presentation of considerations involving culture shock would have to be included if the book were to make a genuine contribution to the literature on adaptation to other cultures.

The manuscript finally arrived, a few weeks after I returned home and had been struggling with the effects of 'reverse' culture shock (but let's not get into *that* troublesome concept!). My high expectations about the manuscript were met, and exceeded. The approach taken by the authors is generally consistent with basic principles of social-learning theory. The book is comprehensive, extremely well referenced, and clearly organized and written. Its broad coverage will be welcomed by

researchers and practitioners in psychology, anthropology, international education, psychiatry, epidemiology, and international management, or by anyone who needs to know about human variations in coping with unfamiliar cultural settings. And unlike any other available book on this topic, Furnham and Bochner have stressed social skills as a means both to avoid certain aspects of culture shock and to deal with the effects once they are experienced.

The authors' main point in emphasizing social skills is that the best way to cope with an unfamiliar environment is to learn *behaviours* which are appropriate for the social situation in question. One can learn about another culture passively and cognitively, perhaps in this way starting the coping process by anticipating how one will adjust. The print and electronic media as well as seminars, classes and conversations with fellow travellers all help in this regard. Although not trivial, this is an abstract and indirect process. To understand the consequences of culture shock, and to know what has to be done to resolve them, will require action in *both* the cognitive and behavioural spheres. Such is the general aim of the social-skills approach for the reduction of unpleasant consequences of learning how to behave properly in an unfamiliar setting.

While Furnham and Bochner emphasize social skills as an effective way to help ameliorate the negative side of behaving awkwardly or incorrectly in a foreign milieu, their book is not just one of applied behaviourism. On the contrary, it is a remarkably well-researched and broad-banded book, and gives a thorough overview of the topic. For instance, at least seven different 'theories' or 'explanations' (their quotation marks) are outlined and critically appraised. The authors also cover a wide range of conditions which may induce culture shock – from the simple, brief sojourn of the camera-toting tourist, to the trauma of being a refugee or the victim of forced migration.

Had I the pleasure of writing such a solid book, it would have been tempting to devote a section to the numerous factors which determine how seriously a *specific* person may be affected by culture shock. Before anyone's reactions to a new culture can be completely understood, an assessment of these factors will be needed. At least six classes of 'predictor variables' seem important enough to merit individual consideration:

1. *Control factors.* How much control does one have over *initiating* the other-culture experience? This could range from complete control (as in an idyllic vacation to a sun-swept island) to absolutely no control (such as forced and permanent relocation for political or economic reasons).
2. *Intrapersonal factors.* These would include the person's age, extent of previous travel, language skills, resourcefulness, independence, fortitude, capacities to tolerate ambiguities and frustrations, appearance and similar personal characteristics.

3. *Organismic–biological factors.* Included here would be one's overall physical condition, special medical or dietary needs and general ability to tolerate physically the demands of stressful disruptions in the tempo of one's familiar routine.
4. *Interpersonal factors.* The nature and extent of one's support group, both at home and abroad, including whether one is travelling alone, would be important. Ability to call others for urgent assistance (medical, financial, legal) or just a friendly visit over a cup of coffee or glass of beer would be affected by one's support group. The mutual expectations of all parties concerned – before, during, and after the sojourn – would also affect how one behaves.
5. *Spatial–temporal factors.* Where on earth is one going, and when, and for how long? An extended trip to the Arctic in winter will not be the same as a short trip up north in the summer.
6. *Geopolitical factors.* The current level of international, national, regional or local tensions, which can change in an instant depending upon whose 'side' one is on (perhaps correctly or incorrectly perceived by others), can critically affect the individual. These factors and what one may or may not say about contemporary events would have to be handled very carefully.

Considerations such as the above are implied by the authors throughout the book. Stating them in this way, however, will underscore the multidimensionality of the interesting phenomenon of culture shock. These comments may be of some assistance in comprehending the valuable scope of this book.

In concluding my remarks, I want to congratulate the authors for a job very well done, and to thank them for asking me to contribute some thoughts on the topic. I learnt a great deal from reading the manuscript. Their volume is an impressive review and analysis of just about every piece of literature published in the English language (and maybe a few others) on culture shock. It also gives prescriptions for practical ways of handling it. Furnham and Bochner's book will be one of the first things that I pack for my next trip to a new and different place; it will also be the first book that I recommend to my anxious and apprehensive sojourning friends. Anyone interested in the varieties and vicissitudes of human adaptation to unfamiliar cultures will find it to be a thoughtful and thorough piece of scholarship. It will also be, for many, a practical resource for those whose work involves assisting others who are rendered temporarily ineffective by all the factors that are embraced under the simple, riveting concept of culture shock.

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