

Culture Shock: A Fish Out of Water

Kalvero Oberg was one of the first writers to identify five distinct stages of culture shock. He found that all human beings experience the same feelings when they travel to or live in a different country or culture. He found that culture shock is almost like a disease: it has a cause, symptoms, and a cure.

Whenever someone travels overseas they are like "a fish out of water." Like the fish, they have been swimming in their own culture all their lives. A fish doesn't think about what water it is in. Likewise, we often do not think too much about the culture we are raised in. Our culture helps to shape our identity. Many of the cues of interpersonal communication (body language, words, facial expressions, tone of voice, idioms, slang) are different in different cultures. One of the reasons that we feel like a fish out of water when we enter a new culture, is that we do not know all of the cues that are used in the new culture.

Psychologists tell us that there are five distinct phases (or stages) of culture shock. It is important to understand that culture shock happens to all people who travel abroad, but some people have much stronger reactions than others.

During the first few days of a person's stay in a new country, everything usually goes fairly smoothly. The newcomer is excited about being in a new place where there are new sights and sounds, new smells and tastes. The newcomer may have some problems, but usually accepts them as just part of the newness. They may find themselves staying in hotels or with a home-stay family that is excited to meet the foreign stranger. The newcomer may find that "the red carpet" has been rolled out and they may be taken to restaurants, movies and tours of the sights. The new acquaintances may want to take the newcomer out to many places and "show them off." This first stage of culture shock is called the "honeymoon phase."

Unfortunately, this honeymoon phase often comes to an end fairly soon. The newcomer has to deal with transportation problems (buses that don't come on time), shopping problems (can't buy their favorite foods) or communication problems (just what does "Chill out, dude." mean?). It may start to seem like people no longer care about your problems. They may help, but they don't seem to understand your concern over what they see as small problems. You might even start to think that the people in the host country don't like foreigners.

This may lead to the second stage of culture shock, known as the "rejection phase." The newcomer may begin to feel aggressive and start to complain about the host culture/country. It is important to recognize that these feelings are real and can become serious. This phase is a kind of crisis in the 'disease' of culture shock. It is called the "rejection" phase because it is at this point that the newcomer starts to reject the host country, complaining about and noticing only the bad things that bother them. At this stage the newcomer either gets stronger and stays, or gets weaker and goes home (physically, mentally or both).

If you don't survive stage two successfully, you may find yourself moving into stage three: the "regression phase." The word "regression" means moving backward, and in this phase of culture shock, you spend much of your time speaking your own language, watching videos from your home country, eating food from home. You may also notice that you are moving around campus or around town with a group of students who speak your own language. You may spend most of this time complaining about the host country/culture.

Also in the regression phase, you may only remember the good things about your home country. Your homeland may suddenly seem marvelously wonderful; all the difficulties that you had there are forgotten and you may find yourself wondering why you ever left (hint: You left to learn English!). You may now only remember your home country as a wonderful place in which nothing ever went wrong for you. Of course, this is not true, but an illusion created by your culture shock 'disease.'

If you survive the third stage successfully (or miss it completely) you will move into the fourth stage of culture shock called the "recovery phase" or the "at-ease-at-last phase." In this stage you become more comfortable with the language and you also feel more comfortable with the customs of the host country. You can now move around without a feeling of anxiety. You still have problems with some of the social cues and you may still not understand everything people say (especially idioms). However, you are now 90% adjusted to the new culture and you start to realize that no country is that much better than another - it is just different lifestyles and different ways to deal with the problems of life.

With this complete adjustment, you accept the food, drinks, habits and customs of the host country, and you may even find yourself preferring some things in the host country to things at home. You have now understood that there are different ways to live your life and that no way is really better than another, just different. Finally, you have become comfortable in the new place.

It is important to remember that not everyone experiences all the phases of culture shock. It is also important to know that you can experience all of them at different times: you might experience the regression phase before the rejection phase, etc. You might even experience the regression phase on Monday, the 'at ease' phase on Tuesday, the honeymoon phase on Wednesday, and the rejection phase again on Thursday. What will Friday be like?

Much later, you may find yourself returning to your homeland and -guess what? - you may find yourself entering the fifth phase of culture shock. This is called "reverse culture shock" or "return culture shock" and occurs when you return home. You have been away for a long time, becoming comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle and you may find that you are no longer completely comfortable in your home country. Many things may have changed while you were away and it may take a little while to become at ease with the cues and signs and symbols of your home culture.

Reverse culture shock can be very difficult. There is a risk of sickness or emotional problems in many of the phases of culture shock. Remember to be kind to yourself all the time that you are overseas, and when you get home. Give yourself time to adjust. Be your own best friend. If you do these things you will be a much stronger person. If you do these things, congratulations, you will be a citizen of the world!

-The End-