

THE STAGES OF CROSS CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

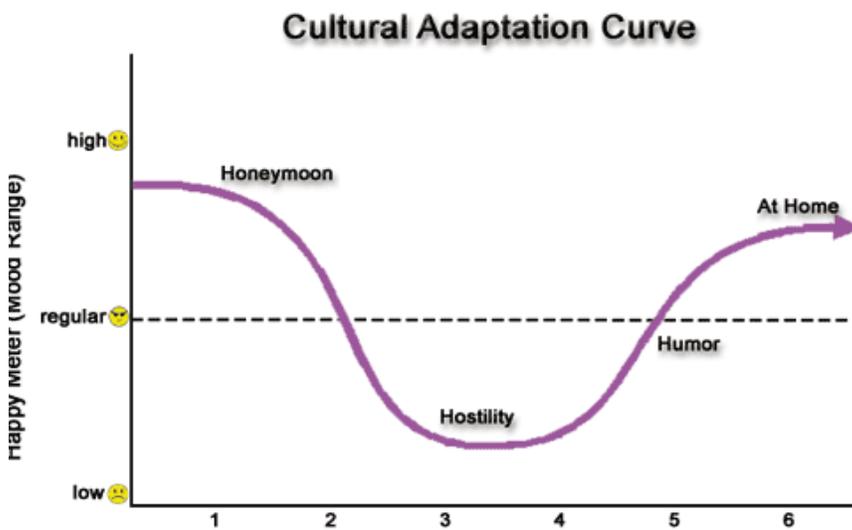
BASED ON THE U-CURVE THEORY BY OBERG

CULTURE SHOCK

A word to the student who has decided to explore the world

You went through a number of preparations in order to come to UGA: making sure that you were academically prepared; securing necessary finances; saying good-bye to the comfort of family, friends, and familiar surroundings; booking travel arrangements; and acquiring language skills, to name but a few. Once you are abroad, things should go smoothly, right? You should immediately fit into your new routine in a totally new education and living environment, right? If that actually happens, then you are among a rare group of individuals, indeed!

Most people who move between cultures (for study, work, tourism, or to take up a new permanent residence) experience a period of adjustment as they establish themselves in their new environment. The adjustment period may be accompanied by dramatic manifestations of symptoms such as anxiety, headaches, digestive problems, and sleep disorders, or may bring less severe symptoms such as discomfort and a more volatile temperament. Research shows that most people who travel outside their home culture experience cultural adjustment in similar ways which, when charted, have come to be known as The U-Curve of Cultural Adaptation. It is called a “U-Curve” because people generally start at a high point, then experience a decline, or depression, before a leveling off period, then go through a critical “recovery” stage and end up more or less balanced, where they began. When charted, it looks something like this:



If you should experience any of the difficulties of learning to live in a new culture, it is important to recognize that you are not alone! You are in step with thousands of others who have crossed cultures for whatever purpose.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION IS A NATURAL PROCESS

Your worth as a person, your strength, your stamina, and your flexibility are not in question. You are not lessened by the cultural adaptation process; it is simply a natural phase in the overall cross-cultural experience.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION IS AN INDIVIDUAL PROCESS

You may not experience the adjustment process in exactly the same way as your peers. Each person's experience is shaped by what they bring to it. In the same fashion, the rapidity with which you go through the adaptation is highly individual. For some, it is a question of weeks; for others, months. And some experience the process more than once during their experience abroad!

Some people find cultural differences interesting and stimulating, and they want more! Others, when experiencing discomfort or confusion, have a tendency to judge or evaluate other people and to reach negative conclusions.

THE STAGES OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

THE HONEYMOON STAGE

Common thoughts during the Honeymoon Stage include:

“Isn’t this exciting? I can’t wait to tell _____ about this. Aren’t they interesting? Everything here is so _____!”

Characteristics of the Honeymoon Stage:

- You are busy taking care of business (registration, housing, bank account, etc.)
- You are observing the new culture and familiarizing yourself with the new environment
- You are meeting useful and friendly university staff and faculty
- You are making your first social contacts with members of the host culture
- You are seeing and doing new things and enjoying a new world

THE HOSTILITY STAGE

Common thoughts during the Hostility Stage include:

“We would never do that in my country! Why can’t they just _____?”

“I only have _____ months before I go home. These people are so _____!”

Characteristics of the Hostility Stage:

- You begin to desire more personal relationships with members of the host culture
- You find you have little time or opportunity to make friends
- You are feeling isolated, out of place, tired, sick, depressed, angry, or frustrated
- You have a growing awareness that your home culture’s behaviors may not be accepted in the host culture, and you may have to give up, suspend, or modify your own behavior
- Your high expectations remain unmet
- You blame the host culture for your problems
- You spend lots of time with members of your home culture complaining about the host culture
- You experience problems with the subtleties of the target language

THE HUMOR STAGE

Common thoughts during the Humor Stage include:

“Why shouldn’t they say/do that? We say/do that too, but differently.”

Characteristics of the Humor Stage:

- You choose to become an “explorer” in the new culture
- You accept the challenge of self-reflection
- You assume responsibility for your own cultural adjustment

THE AT HOME STAGE

Common thoughts during the At Home Stage include:

“You don’t understand them like I do. I’m beginning to like this.”

Characteristics of the At Home Stage:

- Your language skills improve noticeably
- You begin to understand the actions of members of the host culture
- You have finally made friends and feel part of the community
- You develop a greater tolerance for what is strange and new
- You become a mediator between the two cultures
- You feel proud that you can make yourself understood in the target language and that you can understand native speakers

TIPS TO MAKE A SMOOTHER CULTURAL TRANSITION

ASK QUESTIONS

Ask questions of the practical nature, such as “Where may I find food/stuff from my home country?” or “Where is the nearest bank?”, but also ask questions about a person’s opinion on things, and about their experiences. Ask for their reactions to happenings, newspaper articles, television programs, etc. You may find that some stereotypes you held about your new host culture are crumbling!

LEARN AND PRACTICE THE LOCAL LANGUAGE

There are regional and local variations to most languages. Learn the version that pertains in your new host culture. Watch television, listen to the radio, read local newspapers, and Talk! Talk! Talk! with persons you encounter everywhere you go during your everyday routine.

OBSERVE RITUAL SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Notice what people say and how they say it when they greet an acquaintance, when they are introduced to a stranger, when they say goodbye to a friend or to someone they have just met. Watch for variations with age, sex, and apparent social status.

TAKE “FIELD TRIPS”

A field trip is a visit to a place where you can observe what happens. Your field trip may be conducted in a visit to someone’s home, the grocery store, or a public school. Riding public transportation is also another great trip! You may be amazed by how much you can learn simply by observing.

TALK WITH EXPERIENCED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

One of the benefits of studying at most universities abroad is the presence of other international students from different countries. Their experiences can be an invaluable resource for you, the new sojourner. Don’t limit yourself to members of your own culture group: be adventuresome!

KEEP A JOURNAL OR BLOG

Writing in a journal or blog is a time-honored method of coping with a new culture. Writing about your experiences forces you to be observant and to reflect on what is happening to you and around you.

READ

An abundance of materials exist about your new national, regional, and local host cultures. Newspapers, magazines, and the university libraries are excellent resources for your quest.

VIEW YOURSELF AS AN EDUCATOR

You can use your stay abroad to teach a few host country nationals about your home culture. Thinking of yourself as an educator may give you additional patience and help you avoid becoming irritated when asked questions to which the answers may seem just plain obvious to you!

REFLECT

An essential part of the cultural adaptation process is taking time to reflect on what is happening to you and around you. The demands of academics are rigorous and reflection time won’t happen unless you purposefully set out to reserve the time for it. Ask yourself such questions as “What did I expect from my study abroad experience?”, “How does reality compare with my expectations?”, “What can I do to make my experience more constructive and interesting?”, and “How is the experience preparing me to meet my goals for the future?”

LAST REMINDER

Culture shock experience doesn’t stop at a certain time or certain stage. It can continue to happen throughout your stay in the host country. There will be times when you feel like you are at home or getting used to the host country’s culture. There might be times when you still discover something new in this culture and find yourself going through the cultural adaptation stages again. The process can be frustrating and irritating. But remember, you are NOT alone. It is a process that most international students experience. During this process, it is also not unusual for an international student to seek help or support from the health center by a professional psychologist.

AMERICAN VALUES & CUSTOMS

Life in the United States can be quite different than what you are used to, and sometimes the differences pop up in surprising places. Learning what behavior means can be difficult and interacting with Americans can be a major cultural adjustment. Here are some tips to get you started. Keep in mind that these are generalizations in order to give you a better understanding of the culture as a whole. When meeting individuals for the first time, you should use intuition and observational skills to understand their individual values and customs. Remember: If in doubt, ask questions!

Americans value...

... their **INDIVIDUALITY**. Americans are encouraged at an early age to develop and pursue their own goals. There is a high value placed on independence. A person's status usually is determined by their education and individual achievements.

... their **TIME**. Americans take pride in using their time wisely and most people prefer to stay very busy. This is why they tend to plan events in advance. Punctuality is very important and can be an adjustment for many international visitors. If someone is picking you up, you are expected to be ready at the agreed upon time. If you are meeting others in a public place, it is very important to arrive on time. Many Americans feel that arriving late for social events or appointments indicates a lack of respect for the person that is kept waiting.

... their **PRIVACY**. Americans value private space, such as their home or vehicle, and are used to standing a little bit further away from people they are talking to when compared to other cultures. Most people are guarded with what they consider personal information. This includes their income, the cost of their possessions, family problems, etc.

Some things to expect:

INTRODUCTIONS: It is proper to shake hands with everyone to whom you are introduced, regardless of their age or gender. If you want to introduce yourself to someone, extend your hand for a handshake and say, "Hello, I'm ... [name]" An appropriate response to an introduction is, "Nice to meet you." You will commonly hear people introduced with the titles Mr., Mrs., or Miss (Ms.). The title Mrs. means the woman is married and the title Miss means the woman is not married. The title Mr. does not indicate whether a man is married or not married.

INFORMALITY: The American lifestyle is generally quite casual and this can sometimes be shocking to others who are not used to it. Dress for class is commonly very casual. In the workplace dress can be formal or informal, and among acquaintances first names and eye contact are almost always used, regardless of age or position. Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing others of unpleasant information. Americans are likely to be very direct in confrontation and anything other than the most direct and open approach is usually considered to be viewed suspiciously. 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.

INVITATIONS: Sometimes Americans say things like "See you later," or "Let's get together some time," and this kind of friendly statement is not necessarily an invitation. If an actual invitation is being extended, the date, time, and place will be specified. It is perfectly polite to say no. If you say yes, you should attend, unless you contact them ahead of time to cancel. It is impolite to accept an invitation and not go. It is not mandatory to bring your partner when you are invited to someone's home; however, it is received well if you do. Hands are used to eat party snack foods served in big bowls or platters, along with pizza, hamburgers, hotdogs, sandwiches, and corn on the cob. It is perfectly polite to say, "No, thank you," when you are offered food.

EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCES

MISSION OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM:

- To offer many types of courses and degrees
- To teach, research, and reach out to the community

SYLLABUS

- Be familiar with the requirements and transferable credits for a course
- Test taking system includes midterms and finals, and can take different forms (e.g., multiple choice, essays, take home)
- Grading system is included on the syllabus
- Ask your professor for accommodation if needed or check with Disability Resource Center at www.drc.uga.edu

EXPECTED WORKLOAD

- Learning styles (what works best for you?)
- Attendance is very important and can count towards your grade
- Participation in class discussion is strongly recommended and can also count towards your grade
- Lab work can include working in groups or pairs, doing research, and so on
- It is very important to keep up with textbook reading
- Plagiarism includes copying any work from any person (not giving the person any credit), and handing it in as your own work. All borrowed work must be cited! For more information, please read the handout, A Culture of Honesty: UGA's Academic Honesty Policy

RELATIONSHIPS

- Build good working relationships with your professors (and faculty members), administrative staff, and students (e.g., peers, graduate and teaching assistants) who are concerned about their academic work
- Join your departmental student organization and/or one of ISL's student organizations (you can also join UGA's 600+ student organizations!)
- It is okay to ask questions of professors and set up meetings outside of class time

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

- Use the library: attend library orientation and ask librarians to help with research (<http://www.libs.uga.edu/askaquestion/index.html>)
- Research is very necessary for essay work and group work

