

Culture Shock and Communication

Avoiding Misadventures in Cross-Cultural Relations

Adapted with permission from an original document written by Sabrina Butteris, MD, and James Conway, MD, for the University of Wisconsin's Global Health Institute; revised 3/12/18. Also referenced in the Global Child Health Educational Modules Project "Preparation for Global Health Electives" preparation packet, St Clair et al, AAP and CUGH, 2013.

Congratulations! You are about to embark on a memorable and valuable experience. The purpose of this guide is to help you begin to think about and prepare for the feelings you are likely to experience during your time abroad and to understand the rationale behind the guidelines for communication for participants in GH elective electives. Although no two people have the same experience or react in the same way, there are general patterns that apply to everyone. Culture shock is a well-described phenomenon that affects all travelers to varying degrees. Whether you are a seasoned traveler, or this is your first trip, you may find that the natural adjustments that occur during your time in your host community are amplified. You will be living in a new place and adapting to a new work environment. Being cognizant of your feelings and emotions as they relate to situations you encounter during your GH elective will help you to moderate your reactions, improve your interactions with colleagues, and walk away with a more complete picture of the community in which you will be spending time. Private documentation of your reflections throughout your elective will provide you with some protection from unnecessary cultural misunderstandings and offenses.

Culture shock: an overview

What Is It?

"The loss of emotional equilibrium that a person suffers when he moves from a familiar environment where he has learned to function easily and successfully to one where he has not." – Arthur Gordon

Why Does It Happen?

Over the course of our lives, our own culture becomes deeply engrained via habitual, learned behaviors. Our culture quickly becomes invisible to us. We believe that the way we have grown to know life is the way that it should be, that it is "normal." Without knowing it, our ways of living become ingrained as moral claims. When we enter a new culture, we experience an abrupt loss of familiarity. We try to understand the different norms and guidelines that dictate life in the new culture. We are forced to re-learn how to live day to day. Although we strive to do what is appropriate, we often don't know exactly what that is. This creates a sense of social isolation, and differences subconsciously become classified as senseless, irrational, or even immoral.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms?

As with many conditions, culture shock is manifested on a spectrum ranging from mild uneasiness to unhappiness to true psychological panic. Although the list below is not exhaustive, it is likely that you will experience some of the following:

- Frustration
- Irritability

- Hypersensitivity
- Mental fatigue
- Boredom
- Lack of motivation
- Physical discomfort
- Disorientation about how to work with/relate to others
- Suspicion (feeling like everyone is trying to take advantage of you)
- Excessive concern for cleanliness
- Loss of perspective

Stages of Culture Shock

There are many different versions of the stages of culture shock; however, they vary mostly in complexity rather than true content. The most commonly used stages are described as follows:

- Honeymoon – new things seem exciting; see similarities
- Rejection (shock) – everything feels difficult; see only differences
- Regression – glorification of home; critical of new things; superior attitude develops
- Acceptance/negotiation – routine develops; sense of humor returns
- Reverse culture shock – incorporating the “new” you into your “old” life.

Distilled into its most basic form, the stages of culture shock can be simplified as follows:

- At first, we think it is charming
- Then we think it is evil
- Then we think it is different.

Reactions

Typical reactions include assuming the problem lies with everyone else (ie, something is wrong with “them,” not “us”), overvaluing our own culture, defining our culture in moral terms (natural, rational, civilized, polite), undervaluing the new culture and seeing it as chaotic or immoral, and stereotyping in an attempt to make the world predictable.

When Culture Shock Leads to Cultural Insensitivity

How we react to the culture shock we are experiencing is the crux of what causes well-intentioned people to display unsavory behaviors. Culturally insensitive and inappropriate situations arise when our behavior, actions (or reactions), and responses reflect the stage of culture shock that we are experiencing. To make matters worse, when we are feeling the most frustrated, we have the least amount of information available to help us understand why things happen the way that they do.

Although our understanding of the system increases over time, it is impossible to fully understand the complex set of interactions occurring simultaneously. Being aware of our emotional reactions and always attempting to increase our understanding will not only enhance the experience but also decrease the likelihood that something we do will reflect poorly on our program, our colleagues, or ourselves.

Culture Shock and the Internet

In today's world of email, social media, and blogs, the public sharing of thoughts, ideas, and feelings has become commonplace. As opposed to individualized personal communication (phone calls or letters), these modes of communication allow for complete, real-time transparency of thought. In the context of GH experiences and reactions to the stages of culture shock, this level of transparency can be damaging. With an incomplete understanding of the culture in which one is living, a well-intentioned writer may unintentionally use descriptors that are culturally insensitive or unacceptable. The thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about a host community will inevitably change as a visitor passes through the various stages of culture shock. Reflecting on these emotions and experiences in a forum that could be available to others not only poses ethical and professional dilemmas but also has the potential for lasting cultural misunderstandings and transgressions that will impact the individual as well as the institution. As the sharing of information becomes increasingly easy, the risk for inadvertent viewing of that same material also increases. Far too often, communication intended for family or friends is forwarded or accessed by those who may not fully understand or appreciate the context.

Successfully Navigating the Seas of Cultural Humility

Culture shock affects even the most seasoned and experienced traveler. All writers feel that they have been both self-aware and sensitive as they are creating and sharing their observations. However, the process of culture shock involves shifting perceptions of one's surroundings over time. This constantly evolving experience and the ease of information dissemination makes the risks associated with electronic sharing of critical importance for all partners in GH relationships. Although culture shock is an unavoidable phenomenon, understanding how the adjustment to a new culture can affect thoughts and behaviors may allow visitors to better moderate their reactions. Incorporating this knowledge into private and thoughtful reflection is a key element of developing cultural humility. Combined with patience and adaptability, this practice can lead to meaningful, lifelong relationships between global partners. Commitment to Professionalism: Communication Guidelines

First and foremost, remember that you are a visitor and a guest. Your role during your GH experience should reflect this attitude. You are to uphold the highest standards of professionalism, respect, and courtesy. Throughout your GH elective, you will be acting not only as an ambassador on behalf of your training program but also of the United States. Your behavior during your field experience not only has the ability to impact the health of the partnership with your host site but also directly reflects on the character of those from your training program. Prioritizing the privacy of host communities and individuals within those communities and a commitment to developing culturally sensitive collaboration require the use of great discretion when communicating details of your experience with those outside of the host community. Refer to your training program's privacy policies regarding patient information and patient photography and uphold the same privacy standards at your host site. The use of internet-based venues for communication is strongly discouraged. Full disclosure and transparency of purpose must be provided to those being photographed (including how the photograph may be

used and who will be able to see it) and permission should always be obtained from both the patient (or parent) and the hosting institution.

Finally, presentations given on return should be mindful of portraying the host community in a way that would be considered respectful and culturally appropriate in that setting. Presentations should be reviewed with your GH faculty mentor and/or the host institution prior to being delivered.

Resources and Further Reading around Culture Shock

1. Foster J. Cultural Humility and the Importance of Long-Term Relationships in International Partnerships. *JOGNN*. 2009;38:100-107.
 2. Kamei R. Why Dying Doesn't Seem to Matter: The Influence of Culture on Physicians in Bali, Indonesia. *Acad Med*. 2003 Jun;78(6):635.
 3. Koehn P. Globalization, Migration Health, and Educational Preparation for Transnational Medical Encounters. *Globalization and Health*. 2006;2(2).
 4. Kumagai A, Lybson M. Beyond Cultural Competence: Critical Consciousness, Social Justice, and Multicultural Education. *Acad Med*. 2009 Jun;84(6):782-787.
 5. Levi A. The Ethics of Nursing Student International Clinical Experiences. *JOGNN*. 2009;38:94-99.
 6. Pedersen, Paul. *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World*. Contributions in Psychology, No. 25. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995.
 7. Tervalon, Melanie (1998). Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9 (2): 117–125.
 8. The Cultural Orientation Resource Center: www.cal.org/CORC
 9. Culture Crossing Guide: <http://guide.culturecrossing.net/>
 10. Kwintessential Guide: <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html>
 11. Communication styles: Getting to Si, Ja, Oui, Hai, and Da. Meyer, E. *Harvard Business Review*. Dec 2015. https://hbr.org/2015/12/getting-to-si-ja-oui-hai-andda?utm_campaign=HBR&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social
- Online Global Child Health Educational Modules Project (GCHEMP) Culture Module
http://media.edgh.washington.edu/gchemp/culture/presentation_html5.html