

Cultural Competency Online Course

Cultural competence training and cultural awareness is of paramount importance for those working in any international or clinical setting. Those participating abroad are immersed in a culture different from their own and will undoubtedly therefore experience culture shock and cultural adjustment. Furthermore, those in any clinical setting must understand language barriers, how to work with translators, cultural differences and cultural understanding, and trust, among other cultural concerns.

Unite For Sight's priority is to ensure that our volunteers understand their own personal impact on those in clinical and international settings. All Unite For Sight volunteers participating in [Volunteer Abroad Programs](#) are required to complete this Cultural Competency Online Course.

Those not currently involved in Unite For Sight are also encouraged to review the important information contained in this course.

Online Course

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MODULE 1: Culture and the Volunteer

Even for those who love to travel to new places, it is not easy to leave the comforts of home and immerse themselves in a completely foreign, unfamiliar environment. All volunteers who travel abroad will experience some degree of culture shock. To cushion this shock and ensure an enjoyable, effective volunteer experience, extensive preparation is essential. As with any shock, culture shock is largely precipitated by the element of surprise. Volunteers can minimize culture shock by knowing what to expect when they arrive at their destination. If you have some understanding of local customs and norms, your transition to living in your target local community will be much faster and smoother. You will indeed be *living* abroad; if you simply consider your volunteer experience a

short visit to a foreign country, it will be very difficult to overcome your ethnocentrism and open your mind to understanding and absorbing the local culture.

“I’ve been abroad a lot of times... [but] I was really excited... to go and really live somewhere for two months and not just be a visitor. Working with Unite for Sight in Asikuma last summer was fantastic. It was the most memorable summer I ever had.”⁽¹⁾—
Jackie Madison, *Unite For Sight Volunteer in Ghana*

Know that you are not alone in this process. The local organizational staff will be your guides and assistants for all cultural needs. In this foreign culture, they are experts and you are a novice. The countless routine daily tasks that you effortlessly undertake in your home country will likely pose a challenge overseas. Take advantage of staff members to help you with everything from basic communication and common courtesy to learning what foods to eat and dealing with people who ask you for money and favours.

Footnotes

⁽¹⁾ “Jackie Madison Speaks About Volunteering With Dr. Baah.” Online Video Clip. Uniteforsight.org. Accessed on 02 December 2008.
<<http://www.uniteforsight.org/volunteer-abroad/ghana/asikuma>

MODULE 2: Cultural Adjustment and Culture Shock

Understanding the Importance of Culture

Anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists alike have long-attempted to formulate a concise, comprehensive definition of culture. University of Chicago psychology professor Harry Triandis conceptualizes culture as a “pattern of shared attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, and values that is organized around a theme that can be identified among those who speak a particular language, during a specific historic period, and in a defined geographic area.”⁽¹⁾ Robert LeVine, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Harvard University, defines cultural beliefs as the “shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community, and the meanings of communicative actions.”⁽²⁾ These definitions (and many others) are simultaneously correct, and indicate just how vast the concept of culture is.

Though perhaps imprecise and less explicit than his colleagues, Dr. Clifford Geertz of the Institute for Advanced study provides subtly profound insight into the idea of culture that is very useful for international volunteers:

“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs.”⁽³⁾

It follows that without culture, man is in freefall. Our culture orients, grounds, supports, and frames our lives. Cultural beliefs are built into our outlooks on the world, providing a reference point for understanding what we observe and a guide for how to act. Those from different cultural backgrounds simply have a different frame of reference; what we perceive to be “normal” is merely a consequence of the culture we are raised in:

“The behaviour of people from another culture may seem strange to you, but it probably makes sense to them, and vice versa. The reason any behaviour makes sense is simply because it is consistent with what a given person believes in or holds dear.”⁽⁴⁾

It is also essential to realize that we are often blind to elements of our own culture until it is contrasted with another. Our culture is our default context, or baseline. Remembering this will help you understand why others sometimes consider your ways to be strange, and vice versa.

Culture Shock(6)

Who: Anyone and everyone who travels to a foreign culture is susceptible to culture shock.

What: Culture shock is the holistic reaction to displacement from one's familiar environment. Suddenly, you find yourself unable to understand, communicate, and function effectively. Common symptoms of culture shock include:

1. Feelings of frustration, loneliness confusion, melancholy, irritability, insecurity, helplessness
2. Unstable temperament and hostility
3. Paranoia
4. Criticism of local people, culture, and customs
5. Excessive concern over drinking water, food dishes, and bedding
6. Fear of physical contact with locals
7. Oversensitivity and overreaction to minor difficulties
8. Changes in eating and sleeping habits
9. Loss of sense of humour

When: Sometimes, transitioning to a foreign culture can have an immediate impact. An American tourist travelling to a developing country might be instantly alarmed or disheartened by living conditions that seems perfectly normal and acceptable to the locals – no private bedrooms or toilet facilities, the use of chewing sticks rather than toothbrushes, or the conspicuous absence of McDonald's. Much more common, however, is delayed culture shock.

"Often when a person takes up residence in a foreign country there's a period of excitement and exhilaration when everything seems new and challenging and fascinating... It is not until this honeymoon period ends that the newcomer begins to realize that there are endless subtle differences that leave him facing a host of perplexing problems." (7)

Where: Culture shock occurs wherever you experience an abrupt change in cultural environment. Thus, when you travel to a foreign country you can expect to experience culture shock. More surprisingly, you may experience 'reverse culture shock' upon re-entry to your home country, as you will again be suddenly changing cultures. Refer to module 12 for detailed information regarding reverse culture shock.

Why: Although culture shock is a complex phenomenon, experts agree that the basic cause of culture shock is the "abrupt loss of the familiar, which in turn causes a sense of isolation and diminished self-importance." (8) According to anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people; when and how to give tips; how to give orders to servants; how to make purchases; when to accept and when to refuse invitations;

when to take statements seriously and when not... All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we do not carry on the level of conscious awareness. Now when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props has been knocked out from under him.”(9)

Phases of Cultural Adjustment (10), (11)

In spite of its complexity, the process of acculturation is remarkably predictable. Cultural adjustment consistently occurs in a series of distinct phases, each with specific characteristics. This process generally follows a U-shaped curve beginning with a high, then sinking into shock, and finally recovering to understand and enjoy the new culture.

The Honeymoon Phase: After months of excitement, anticipation, and preparation, you finally arrive at your destination. Thus begins the phase of initial euphoria, or the “honeymoon phase.” Everything is new, fascinating and exhilarating. Initially, the similarities between cultures are more apparent than the differences,(12) and differences that you do notice seem interesting and exotic. “In this stage, the students [are] still encapsulated by their back home identities and the adventure abroad was still something of an unreal experience to them.”(13) When reality sets in and the initial elation wears off, travellers transition into the crisis phase.

The Crisis Phase: In this phase, you will experience the brunt of the deleterious symptoms of culture shock. Cultural differences become more salient, and you will become frustrated by difficulties communicating and performing basic tasks. Frustration gives way to irritability, depression, and other symptoms of culture shock. These sentiments are compounded by feelings of being an outsider, which may lead to a desire to withdraw. Many travellers are tempted to cling to their own culture by associating with other Westerners; this simply extends and intensifies the crisis phase of culture shock.

The Recovery Phase: As you develop a routine and become more comfortable with your surroundings, you will slip into the recovery phase. You probably will not notice this transition; the recovery phase comprises a gradual adjustment to your new environment. You will begin to orient yourself, be able to interpret subtle cues, and regain self-esteem and a more positive outlook. Most importantly, your perspective will become more and more balanced; you will become less critical of local culture and more open to integrating yourself into the community.

The Adjustment Phase: “Eventually you will develop the ability to function in the new culture. Your sense of ‘foreignness’ diminishes significantly. And not only will you be more comfortable with the host culture, but you may also feel a part of it.”(14) You will, in essence, become bicultural. Everyday tasks and conversation will once again become effortless, and you will develop increasing flexibility and ease in navigating your new surroundings. Motivation, self-confidence, and your sense of humour will have rebounded from the lows of the crisis phase, and the balance between living abroad while holding onto your own cultural identity will have become second nature.

Re-entry: The above cycle is repeated upon return to one’s home country. See module 12 for details about ‘reverse culture shock.’

[Go To Module 3: Coping With Culture Shock and Emotional Feelings >>](#)

Footnotes

- (1) Triandis, H. "The Psychological Measurement of Cultural Syndromes." *American Psychologist*. 51.4 (1996): 407-415.
- (2) LeVine, R. (1984) Properties of culture: An ethnographic view. In Schweder, R. and LeVine, R., Eds. *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1984), 67.
- (3) Geertz, C. "The Interpretation of Cultures." New York: Basic Books, 1973, 5.
- (4) "Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook." Peace Corps Information and Collection Exchange. www.peacecorps.gov. Accessed on 3 December 2008. <<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/culture/pdf/workbook.pdf>>
- (5) Taken from Diesendruck, G. "What's culture?" 7 September 2007. Lecture presentation at Yale University.
- (6) "How to Cope With Culture Shock." 29 April 2003. UW Madison College of Engineering. Accessed on 3 December 2008.<<http://studentservices.engr.wisc.edu/international/cultureshock.html>>
- (7) "How to Cope With Culture Shock." 29 April 2003. UW Madison College of Engineering. Accessed on 3 December 2008.<<http://studentservices.engr.wisc.edu/international/cultureshock.html>>
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Oberg, Kalvero. "Culture Shock." Presented to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, August 3, 1954. Accessed on 3 December 2008. <http://www.lib.calpoly.edu/staff/fvuotto/research_corner/research_guides/cultural/cultureshockarticle.pdf>
- (10) "How to Prepare: Cultural Adjustment." Center for International Education, University of California, Irvine. www.cie.uci.edu. Accessed on 5 December 2008. <<http://www.cie.uci.edu/prepare/shock.shtml>>
- (11) "Cultural Adjustment." International Office, University of California, Berkeley. [Internationaloffice.berkeley.edu](http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu). Accessed on 5 December 2008. <http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/multiple_use/cultural_adjustment.php>
- (12) "How to Cope With Culture Shock." 29 April 2003. UW Madison College of Engineering. Accessed on 3 December 2008.<<http://studentservices.engr.wisc.edu/international/cultureshock.html>>
- (13) Pederson, P. The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995, 77.
- (14) "How to Prepare: Cultural Adjustment." Center for International Education, University of California, Irvine. www.cie.uci.edu. Accessed on 5 December 2008. <http://www.cie.uci.edu/prepare/shock.shtml>

MODULE 3: Coping With Culture Shock and Emotions

Travelling to a developing country is unlike travelling to other countries in the developed world – volunteers must be prepared for an emotional roller coaster. In an effort to

examine the impact of international volunteer work on the volunteers themselves, globalization and international development consultant Arif Jinha conducted an in-depth analysis of personal accounts of volunteer experiences. Although each experience abroad is personal and unique, many past volunteers give similar accounts of the impact of seeing poverty and suffering, and the realization of the extent of health disparities and disease burden.⁽¹⁾ The following is a preview of some distressing emotions you may feel, as well as ways to cope.

Overwhelming Sadness

It is often shocking when someone experiences poverty for the first time. In his thesis, Arif Jinha cites personal accounts of poverty discussed by Canadian volunteers in their online blogs:

“It’s beautiful here, there are many mountains/hills and it is green everywhere but it doesn’t take long to see the poverty.”—Karen’s blog on Kenya⁽²⁾

“I was also bombarded with images of poverty... which, being my first time in a developing country... hit me pretty hard. It’s not really something you can prepare yourself for... seeing it first hand is completely different from reading about it.”—Angela’s blog on Kenya⁽³⁾

Seeing the conditions people live in will likely elicit sadness or feelings of helplessness. Furthermore, observing extreme poverty “inevitably leads to comparisons and new insight into one’s own state of comparative privilege in the world,”⁽⁴⁾ which can give way to feelings of intense guilt.

One of the best ways to cope with the sadness of poverty is to look for happiness in these communities.

“Obviously compared to us they don’t have the same richness in regards to material possessions, but I found so much of the opposite. There was so much more richness in terms of family, mothers taking care of all their children and fathers coming home and playing with their children. There was a lot of time after school for children to play, and another thing that I noticed was that children hold hands and touch each other and play, and that was something that perhaps... I work in elementary schools and you don’t see that as much as that was great to see, and they were full of life and full of laughter – and in that sense I thought that this community is so rich.”—Candice’s blog on Tanzania⁽⁵⁾

It also helps to remember that poverty exists whether you pay attention to it or not. By volunteering, you have made the decision to do something about it. While abroad, you can have a real impact on the lives of those living in poverty, but only if you are not paralyzed by sadness.

The “Mzungu” Factor

Being an outsider is never easy, but there are additional challenges associated with being a Western traveller in the developing world. Regardless of your status in your home country, you will be seen as wealthy; indeed, in this society you are. People may ask you for favours, money, and more, all because they see you not only as the solution to their health ailments, but as the solution to their poverty. This added pressure of being a Western visitor has been termed the “mzungu factor.”⁽⁶⁾ *Mzungu* is the Swahili word for a white person, but is applicable to all Western foreigners.

In the clinic, patients will likely assume you have clout with the medical providers. You may be approached by patients with very moving stories who will ask you for favours, whether it be extra medication, an impromptu visit with the doctor, or even monetary assistance. You will also experience the *mzungu* factor away from the clinic. People may allow you to take their picture, offer to carry your bags, or otherwise extend a helping hand without first telling you that they expect some money in return.⁽⁷⁾ In addition to being asked for money directly, you will likely be quoted higher prices for goods at markets and shops.

“Many people see the expatriate (you) as being very wealthy and therefore capable of affording everything. Expatriates tend to get higher quotations for goods and services without being given the opportunity to make a cheaper choice.”⁽⁸⁾

Lastly, the *mzungu* factor extends beyond monetary wealth. It is very difficult for citizens of the developing world to secure travel visas, and some may therefore see you as a ticket to the Western world. For this reason, be careful about giving out personal contact information.

You have become a close personal friend of one of the nurses at your clinic. You have met her family and eaten at her house several times, and you have invited them to yours. You have also gone on numerous outings together.

Today, as you sip morning coffee at your regular café, she asks you to help her get a visa to the United States. (She plans to go there, find work, and then bring her family over.) You reply that you know nothing about that and suggest she contact the American Embassy for information. “They are quite strict,” she answers. “If you don’t know an American who can help you, you don’t have a chance.”

Difficult situations like these are not uncommon, and can be especially tricky if you are dealing with a close friend. The best approach here is to clearly state that this is not something you are equipped to help with.

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Experiencing the *mzungu* factor can be upsetting. You may feel taken advantage of, or that you are being treated unfairly. The pressure of patients’ requests can become an unwelcome burden, making it tempting to minimize contact with them. Feelings of being an outsider and not fitting in will only be compounded by the *mzungu* factor. Keep in mind that you are not the first to experience these emotions, and that those who have gone before you often have valuable advice. For instance, in a web log entry entitled “Dealing With Being White,” international volunteer Karen explains how she coped with the *mzungu* factor in Kenya by focusing on forming relationships rather than handing out money. “I’m here to build friendships with Kenyans that will last a life time,” she wrote. “Every person I meet will hopefully learn something from this Mzungu, just like I will learn from them. It’s not money, but perhaps it’s something more.”⁽¹⁰⁾ You will not be able to meet everyone’s demands, so you will have to learn to politely decline requests. Local staff and organizers will also be able to help you navigate any uncomfortable or unfamiliar situation, so do not hesitate to ask for help.

Because the challenges of poverty are so overwhelming, at some point you may feel helpless, or that your hard work isn't making a difference.

“There are times for all volunteers when the difficult conditions under which they live and work prove upsetting. Many experience intense feelings of discouragement and futility, especially [early on].”(11)

While feelings of powerlessness are disheartening, remember that big change is nearly always the aggregate of relatively small steps forward. It is also important to focus your perspective on a localized set of goals. You will not solve global poverty in a period of weeks, but you can make an enormous impact on the lives of those in the community you work in.

In addition to your work abroad, one of the best ways for you to maximize your impact is to continue your advocacy work upon returning to your home country. As international development expert Jeffery Sachs observes, two overwhelming barriers preventing the wealthy developed world from solving global poverty are that “people think there are no solutions other than what we are doing, and that we are doing enough.”(12) After having spent several weeks working abroad, you will have the knowledge and credibility to change such thinking. If you take the time to spread awareness and galvanize others, you will be giving the poor and powerless a voice. This is no small impact.

In the same vein, do not forget the importance of the personal growth you undergo during your volunteer experience. You will have grown emotionally and professionally, and gained clinical and cross-cultural competence. You will carry this newfound global citizenship with you in your future endeavours, which may very well include continued work in international development.

“The student’s own advocacy throughout is acting, helping, and empowering, understanding and speaking out. Their experience in the field became commitment and in returning from these experiences, the students made commitments to be part of international health in their careers and throughout their lives... The local impacts of a two-month student experience may be modest, but the impact on creating professional global citizens who will come back again and again in the future to this type of work [is] very significant.”(13)

Paula has just arrived at her worksite, and is excited to begin work. On the first day of clinic, she meets a 14 year-old girl. The girl hasn't seen her family since she was 10, when they moved to the capital where her brothers could attend school. After speaking with the girl through broken English, Paula feels they have forged a genuine connection. She decides to leave the girl with money to pay the bus fare to visit her family.

Later that day, Paula meets a patient who is seven months pregnant. "My son is excited to have a sister - I hope she has beautiful hair like yours," the woman tells Paula. Paula laughs off the flattery, but stops laughing when she looks down at the intake sheet to see the woman has had six pregnancies. "We are poor, there was never enough food to go around," the woman explains. "They fell ill when they were very young." In an effort to prevent the next child from suffering the same fate, Paula gives the woman money to buy nutritional supplements for the baby. The woman begins crying with appreciation, and Paula knows she has done the right thing.

The following day, Paula befriends more locals, and meets other patients with stories just as moving as the previous two. As she realizes she cannot give money to everyone, she is overcome with melancholy. So many millions of people need help, after all – is her hard work even making a dent in the problem?

The above anecdote illustrates how easy it is to sink into feelings of futility. Indeed, on a global scale, distributing small amounts of money to several patients makes a very small and temporary difference. This is not to belittle Paula's generosity, or her potential to create meaningful improvements in people's lives. The reality is quite the opposite – volunteers like Paula make a sustained impact abroad by helping eliminating barriers to patients care. The potential to make a difference grows exponentially if volunteers keep up advocacy efforts once they return home.

General Tips for Coping with Culture Shock and Emotions [\(14\)](#), [\(15\)](#), [\(16\)](#)

1. Travel in a spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to meet and talk with local people
2. Realize that what you are going through is normal, and temporary
3. Take care of yourself – eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep!
4. Do not take anything too seriously – an open mind is the beginning of a great international experience
5. Do not let others get on your nerves – you have come a long way to learn as much as you can, to enjoy the experience, and to be a good ambassador for your country
6. Maintain flexibility, an open mind, and your sense of humour
7. Set realistic, short-term goals, and realize that periodic failures are inevitable
8. Carefully review your preparation materials – those who have gone before you have invaluable advice

9. Do not judge the people of a country by stereotypes, or by the one person with whom you have had trouble – this is unfair to the people as a whole
10. Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely seeing and hearing
11. Remember that other people’s different conceptions of time, manners, privacy, humour, and tact are just that - different, not inferior
12. Be aware of the feelings of local people to prevent what might be offensive behaviour. For example, photography must be particularly respectful of persons.
13. Spend time reflecting on your daily experiences in order to deepen your understanding of your experiences.

[Module 4: Slower Pace and Elastic Time >>](#)

Footnotes

- (1) Jinha, A. “Students in a Globalized World: Impact of Volunteer Work in Developing Countries on Students of the Health Professions.” Honors Undergraduate Thesis, University of Ottawa (2006). Accessed on 8 December 2008.
<<http://www.uottawaglobe.ca/files/Arif%20Jinha%20-%20thesis%20students%20global%20health.doc>>
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- (3) Angela’s blog, as quoted in Jinha, 2006.
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- (5) Candice storytelling, as quoted in Jinha, 2006.
- (6) Jinha, 2006.
- (7) Clarke, J. “Cushioning Cultural Shocks: Guidelines For Volunteers To Ghana.” Uniteforsight.org. Accessed on 10 December 2008.
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<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/05/08/MNGLBCLRVP1.DTL>>
- (13) Jinha, 2006.

(14) “How to Prepare: Cultural Adjustment.” Center for International Education, University of California, Irvine. www.cie.uci.edu. Accessed on 5 December 2008. <<http://www.cie.uci.edu/prepare/shock.shtml>>

(15) “Cultural Adjustment.” International Office, University of California, Berkeley. [Internationaloffice.berkeley.edu](http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu). Accessed on 5 December 2008. <http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/multiple_use/cultural_adjustment.php>

(16) “What is Culture Shock? And How to Adjust in a New Culture.” Consortium for International Education & Multicultural Studies. Accessed on 11 December 2008. <<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/2231757/What-is-Culture-Shock-And-How-to-Adjust-in-a-New-Culture>>

MODULE 4: Slower Pace and Elastic Time

One of the first cultural differences volunteers notice about the developing world relates to notions of time, timing and timeliness. Compared to the Western lifestyle, the pace of life in developing countries is much slower, punctuality is less highly valued, and schedules and appointments are understood to be flexible. The Peace Corps has characterized these two differing concepts of time, which are really two poles of a continuum:

1. Monochronic time: Time is the given and people are the variable. The needs of people are adjusted to suit the demands of time – schedules, deadlines, etc. Time is quantifiable, and a limited amount of it is available. People do one thing at a time and finish it before starting something else, regardless of circumstances.
2. Polychronic time: Time is the servant and tool of people. Time is adjusted to suit the needs of people. More time is always available, and you are never too busy. People often have to do several things simultaneously, as required by circumstances. It’s not necessary to finish one thing before starting another, nor to finish your business with one person before starting in with another.(1)

To summarize, in monochronic societies people work around schedules, whereas in polychronic societies, schedules are worked around people. Although the polychronic notion of time may seem new and obscure, it is actually widespread across cultures and countries.

Slow Progress

People may jokingly tell you that you must learn to run on “African Standard Time.” The shift from a monochronic to a more polychronic time scheme can bewilder and frustrate volunteers.

“Americans are notorious for being doers, activists. One of the most common complaints of Peace Corps Volunteers around the world is how long it takes to ‘get things done’ in the host country. Sometimes the complaint appears in comments about the slow pace of life overseas. This American urge to do something, however, is somewhat inconsistent with the Peace Corps mandate to help other people do something.”(2)

With a goal of building local capacity, volunteers are indeed helping other people learn to “do something.” This doesn’t mean that local community members will be working while volunteers laze around. In other words, don’t make the mistake of confusing *slower pace of life* with *easier lifestyle*:

“What about the ‘work?’ You’ll notice I put that word in quotation marks, not because you won’t work very hard here. It’s just that you won’t understand why it’s so hard. In the States, hard work is 60 hours a week. Here it’s waiting for things to happen, watching them happen at a pace that’s absurdly slow by the standards you’re used to, and then trying to work the way people work here. Otherwise you won’t be working with them, you’ll be working for them.” (3)–Peace Corps Volunteer, Madagascar

Waiting

In your home country, making others wait is probably considered disrespectful and rude. After all, isn’t their time valuable? Who are you to waste it? When you are abroad, however, you can expect to do a lot of waiting. Don’t be insulted if others make you wait; it is not because they are being rude, or because they think you are insignificant. Rather, it is simply a symptom of a culture with a more relaxed attitude toward timeliness and schedules.

“At my site, I’m a 40-minute walk from the closest village where I do my shopping. Many of the stores are run out of villagers’ homes, and these stores have taught me a lesson about Fiji. An Australian man once visited the island while doing research and asked me when the stores were open, since it was afternoon and he hadn’t seen an open store yet. Taken aback by what seemed at the time an incredibly stupid question, I told him the obvious truth. “They’re open when their doors are open.” It was only when I walked away that I realized that it really wasn’t such a stupid question and was a question I might have asked myself when I first arrived on Fiji. Having lived on Lakeba for a year at that time, I had learned my lesson and knew that time is a foreign concept. The stores were open when the villagers decided they had something to sell. Some days they’re open; some days they’re not.

When I first traveled out to my island via the cargo ship, I was told to report at 4:00pm Tuesday. We left late in the day on Thursday. Welcome to a tiny island in the South Pacific.”

-- Peace Corps Volunteer, Fiji

(4)

Patience, flexibility and an open mind are the keys to succeeding as a volunteer in a less monochronic society. For instance, rather than allowing herself to become frustrated with the inefficiencies of a slower daily schedule, Unite For Sight volunteer Jackie Madison embraced the different style of time in Ghana:

“It was sometimes hard to get used to a very different schedule, especially for a college student who is used to going ‘boom, boom, boom,’ and working really fast all the time. [The] Ghanaian way of life... is a bit slower and more calm, but I think in general that’s a great way to spend the summer. I had a fantastic time slowing down for a while.” (5)

Footnotes

- (1) “Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook,” p. 104. Peace Corps Information and Collection Exchange. www.peacecorps.gov. Accessed on 11 December 2008. <<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wvs/publications/culture/pdf/workbook.pdf>>
- (2) “Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook,” p. 148.
- (3) As quoted in “Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook,” p.136.
- (4) As quoted in “Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook,” p.106.
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MODULE 5: Language Barriers

Even in countries where the national language is English, people living in extreme poverty in rural villages often do not speak or understand English. While the local staff will speak English and can act as translators, it will initially be frustrating not to be able to speak directly with patients. This is part of culture shock. As with many of the frustrations of culture shock, the best approach is to step back and calmly embrace what is new and unfamiliar. You will learn that smiles and hand gestures go a long way in communicating and connecting with people. You may even discover new joys and profundity that you otherwise would never have known. As Pradeep Mettu, Unite For Sight Volunteer in Chennai, India, wrote about his experience: “The language barrier ultimately made the experience even more meaningful. Since communication was always an issue, I learned a great deal about the human touch and the intangibles that create a universal language between the health care provider and the patient.”

Module 6 – Working with Translators(1),(2)

In order to communicate with people who speak a different language, you will work with translators. Conducting an interview through an interpreter can be tricky, so to ensure professionalism and clear understanding, you should adhere to the following protocols:

Protocol for interacting with the patient

1. **Introduce yourself and the interpreter before beginning the interview.**
2. **Speak directly to the patient, as if you were interviewing an English-speaking patient**
3. Pay attention to nonverbal cues
4. Make an effort to learn basic phrases in the local language, such as greetings and introductions
5. Speaking through an interpreter can be confusing, but repetition will confirm understanding. Regularly repeat back to the patient what he or she tells you. This will let them know you are engaged, and that you understand their complaints. You should also ask patients to repeat back to you any instructions you give to make sure they have understood.

Protocol for interacting with the interpreter

1. Speak more slowly than usual, and use simple language. Although they speak English, your interpreters may not be native speakers, so speaking extra clearly will ease communication.
2. Speak two to three sentences at a time, and then pause to allow the interpreter to translate. If ever the interpreter puts a hand up or signals you to stop, pause and let them translate what you have said.
3. Avoid long conversations with the interpreter. If speaking directly to the interpreter is necessary, explain the nature of the conversation to the patient. For example, if you need to ask the interpreter about pertinent cultural differences, you should ask permission of the patient first.
4. Maintain your role as the interviewer. After several interviews, interpreters may notice patterns in your questions. They may begin to “get ahead of you,” and ask what they think will be your next question before you ask it. If this happens, politely ask your interpreter to wait for you to ask the question to the patient.

[Go To Module 7: Cultural Differences and Cultural Understanding >>](#)

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Module 7: Cultural Differences and Cultural Understanding

The Importance of Understanding

The progression toward cultural understanding is vital to becoming an effective volunteer. The impact of global health work can only be as strong as its cultural relevance, just like a poem is only meaningful to those who can read and understand the language. As humanitarian entrepreneur Connie Duckworth observes, “It's very hard to just parachute into a developing country. There are so many cultural nuances and ethnic differences, so many things about a particular culture that wouldn't be readily apparent to someone who's not from there. Success or failure of projects or enterprises rests on creating solutions that work within that cultural context.”(1) Culturally sensitive volunteering requires a willingness to learn as well as to give, but most of all humility and the ability to self-evaluate.

“Culture shock can also serve as a signal that we need a moment to stand back from our judgments. If we can do that, we just might learn something about ourselves as well as others.”(2)

Overcoming ethnocentrism involves more than “getting used to” cultural differences. After having been raised in one culture, sudden immersion in a completely different culture can trigger a series of complex emotions and reactions. For some, it can come as a shock that their worldview isn't universal, but is instead just one of many equally valid

worldviews. For others, fundamental differences among people from different backgrounds can be difficult to accept. Still others will immediately admire the “beautiful” and “exotic” characteristics of a foreign culture, and may even temporarily shun their own background. Regardless of your initial attitude toward cultural differences, it is important to develop genuine intercultural sensitivity in order to be an effective volunteer.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

(3), (4), (5), (6)

Intercultural development and communication expert Dr. Milton Bennett has been touted for his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The model describes, in a series of six stages, a continuum of attitudes toward cultural differences. The goal is to move from the ethnocentric stages of denial, defense, and minimization, to the ethnorelative stages of acceptance, adaptation and integration. Bennett describes ethnocentrism as an attitude or mindset which presumes the superiority of one’s own worldview, sometimes without even acknowledging the existence of others. Ethnorelativism, on the other hand, assumes the equality and validity of all groups, and does not judge others by the standards of one’s own culture. Bennett’s six stage model is summarized below.

Ethnocentrism:

1. Denial: People in the denial stage do not recognize the existence of cultural differences. They are completely ethnocentric in that they believe there is a correct type of living (theirs), and that those who behave differently simply don’t know any better. In this phase, people are prone to imposing their value system upon others, believing that they are “right” and that others who are different are “confused.” They are not threatened by cultural differences because they refuse to accept them. Generally, those who experience cultural denial have not had extensive contact with people different from themselves, and thus have no experiential basis for believing in other cultures. A key indicator of the denial stage is the belief that you know better than the locals.
2. Defense: Those in the defense stage are no longer blissfully ignorant of other cultures; they recognize other cultures’ existence, but not their validity. They feel threatened by the presence of other ways of thinking, and thus denigrate them in an effort to assert the superiority of their own culture. Cultural differences are seen as problems to be overcome, and there is a dualistic “us vs. them” mentality. Whereas those in the denial stage are unthreatened by the presence of other cultural value systems (they don’t believe in them, after all), those in the defense stage do feel threatened by “competing” cultures. People in the defense stage tend to surround themselves with members of their own culture, and avoid contact with “them.”

The defense stage is characterized by judgment and aggressive intolerance. Take the following examples:

"Not a single day passed without my painfully experiencing some Turk violating the 'natural and logical way' of doing things. At first, it was staring, then it was abrupt 'no' answers and arrogance from petty officialdom. Later it was blaring horns, and still later, continual interruptions while talking. Each little violation brought irritation, sometimes anger. Rapidly, these irritations built up into an explosiveness that was too easily provoked. This latent tension marred my stay in Turkey." – Peace Corps Volunteer, Turkey

"There comes a day when all this suddenly becomes apparent, all at once. Things are no longer picturesque; they are dirty. No longer quaint but furiously frustrating. And you want like crazy to just get out of there." – Peace Corps Volunteers, Peru

"Very well, I'll go. And I shan't be sorry either. I haven't had a decent meal since I came here and I've done a thing I never thought I should have to do in my life: I've drunk my coffee without sugar. And when I've been lucky enough to get a little piece of black bread, I've had to eat it without butter. Mrs. Harrington will never believe me when I tell her what I've gone through."

While abroad, do not make judgments about how teachers may teach in schools, or how families may live. **Do not make comments or try to adjust or change local behaviors. If you have a concern about any local community behaviors, you should bring your concern to a local staff person and never direct that concern to the local community members.**

"Remember that just as you judge from your cultural standpoint, you are being judged from theirs." – Peace Corps Volunteer, Fiji

(7)

3. **Minimization:** People in the minimization stage of ethnocentrism are still threatened by cultural differences, and therefore try to minimize them by telling themselves that people are more similar than dissimilar. No longer do they see those from other cultures as being misguided, inferior, or otherwise unfortunate. They still have not developed cultural self-awareness, and are insistent about getting along with everyone. Because they assume the fundamental similarity of all cultures, people in this stage fail to tailor their approaches to a cultural context.

At this stage, people say:

- *“The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself – authentic and honest!”*
- *“Customs differ, of course, but when you really get to know them they’re pretty much like us.”*
- *“I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture.”*
- *“Technology is bringing cultural uniformity to the developed world.”*
- *“While the context may be different, the basic need to communicate remains the same around the world.”*
- *“No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things.”*
- *“If people are really honest, they’ll recognize that some values are universal.”*

Minimization seems to emphasize great tolerance, so what are the shortcomings of this stage? While people in this stage are considerably more knowledgeable than those in denial, and nicer than those in the defense stage, they are still bound by ethnocentrism as they universalize their own cultural values. In the minimization stage, people:

- Overestimate their cultural sensitivity
- Are insensitive to differences in race, class, gender, and other categories, because they are intent on emphasizing everyone’s sameness
- Emphasize conformity, which may discourage the creativity that arises from diversity
- May unintentionally be perceived as imposing “cultural imperialism” by minimizing important foreign cultural traits

[\(8\)](#),[\(9\)](#)

A simple way to conceive of the three stages of ethnocentrism is in terms of attitudes toward cultural differences: those in the denial stage deny the existence of cultural differences, those in the defense stage demonize them, and those in the minimization stage trivialize differences.

Ethnorelativism:

1. Acceptance: In this first stage of ethnorelativism, people begin not only to recognize other cultures but to accept them as viable alternatives to their own worldview. They know that people are genuinely different from them, and accept the inevitability of other value systems and behavioural norms. They do not yet adapt their own behaviour to the cultural context, but they no longer see other cultures as threatening, wrong, or inferior. People in the acceptance phase can be thought of as “culture-neutral,” seeing differences as neither bad nor good, but rather as a fact of life.
2. Adaptation: During the adaptation phase, people begin to view cultural differences as a valuable resource, and thus relish the differences. Because differences are seen as positive, people consciously adapt their behaviours to the different cultural norms of their environment.
3. Integration: Integration is the last stage in one’s journey away from ethnocentrism. In this stage, people accept that their identity is not based in any single culture. Once integrated, people can effortlessly and even unconsciously

shift between worldviews and cultural frames of reference. Though they maintain their own cultural identity, they naturally integrate aspects of other cultures into it.

One you have progressed to an ethnorelativistic view of cultural differences, you will in essence be bicultural. You will revel in cultural differences, and be able to effortlessly take on subtle characteristics of the local culture. Your intercultural sensitivity will also affect how others view you, and thus how they treat you. Being trusted and accepted by local people into a culture you have recently come to know and accept will be thrilling and fulfilling, and will allow you to be a more effective volunteer.

[Go To Module 8: Social Etiquette and Its Importance >>](#)

Footnotes

(1) “Analysis: Local Connections are the Key to Success.” 5 December 2008. Business Week Interactive Case Study. www.businessweek.com. Accessed on 16 December 2008. <http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/dec2008/ca2008125_591024_page_2.htm>

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MODULE 8: The Importance of Social Etiquette

Standards of appropriate dress vary among cultures, but volunteers should always dress professionally to show respect, and to avoid misunderstanding, embarrassment, or offending locals. This means clothing must be clean, pressed, and conservative. Men should always tuck in their shirts, and women should make sure their knees, midriffs, and shoulders are covered. Both men and women should wear closed-toed shoes in the clinic, and neither should wear shorts. In addition to these basic standards of dress etiquette, volunteers should research appropriate dress codes that pertain to their particular host country. In India, for example, volunteers should know that “women must always keep their upper arms, chest, back and legs covered.”⁽¹⁾ Volunteers travelling to Ghana should know to remove their hat when speaking to the elderly.⁽²⁾ Other examples of culture-specific dress etiquette norms abound, and volunteers should research these before travelling abroad.

Equally important to learning appropriate dress codes is developing an understanding of the local social etiquette. You will find that standards of politeness and common courtesy vary widely across cultures. This includes knowledge about how to greet different people, rules associated with tipping, giving and accepting gifts, table manners and eating customs, body language and gestures, attitudes toward sacred spaces and more. Even something as seemingly harmless as taking a photograph should be approached with caution in some cultures:

“When in Ghana, beware of what you take photographs of. If you want to take pictures of people, ask them first. Many will happily say yes, but some may try to charge you a fee. Sometimes people may fear that by getting their picture taken their soul will be captured, so be aware of that and always ask before snapping a photo. Do not take photos at government or military buildings, prisons, or airports, and seek permission before photographing sacred grounds.”⁽³⁾

Cultural norms vary from country to country, and even from community to community; there is no one rulebook of social etiquette for the developing world as a whole. In India, for instance, many places will not serve beef, but in Ghana, ordering a meal without meat will be seen as extraordinarily strange.^{(4),(5)} Similarly, in Ghana, a boisterous greeting with a handshake is expected, whereas in India you should not shake someone’s hand unless they extend their arm first. ^{(6),(7)} In both countries, eating or shaking hands with the left hand is improper. There are countless more examples of the diversity of social etiquette across cultures; you will have to learn which rules and norms apply to your travel location. When possible, speaking with past volunteers is a great way to find out about important culture-specific customs.

What's in a greeting?

"I step into the tro tro and squeeze past the other passengers clutching bags of goods picked up at the market. I greet them with a friendly smile and a 'hello.' 'Hello,' they chorus back. 'How are you?' 'Good and you?' 'Good thanks.' Those formalities taken care of, I am now free to choose a seat and prepare for my ride back to the university residence. In downtown Accra, it would be unthinkable to cross paths with another person and not greet him or her.

Even saying 'hello' is not enough: it is also important to inquire after his or her health. Anything less would be considered rude...

Back home in Canada, after three months of studying African music and dance in Ghana, I find I have become accustomed to greeting everyone I come across. I am wandering through the mall in search of back-to-school deals on clothes. 'Hi, how are you?' I inquire as I enter a clothing store. 'Fine,' a confused sales assistant shoots back to me, obviously thinking that I am a little eccentric for inquiring about the health of a stranger. Apparently I am making our business transaction a bit too personal."

(8)

It is especially important for women to be well-aware of cultural standards of dress and social conduct, as very subtle cues can attract unwanted attention. Making eye contact, wearing immodest clothes, or even friendly conversation can sometimes insinuate romantic interest.(9)

"Even if you don't contemplate a cross-cultural romantic relationship... you may be the object of someone else's interest, or you may unintentionally communicate interest in another person, who then responds. It is important, then, for you to be aware of any differences between the norms governing male/female (or same-sex) romantic relationships in American culture and those in your host country."(10)

As a foreign volunteer, you must remember that you are entering a world that is completely unfamiliar to you, and you should thus tread softly. As anthropologist Dr. Geri-Ann Galanti explains, it is tempting to believe that "if [you] just treat each patient with respect, [you] will avert most cultural problems," but in reality, "knowledge of cultural customs can help avoid misunderstanding and enable [provision of] better care."(11)

[Go To Module 9: Cultural Beliefs About Service >>](#)

Footnotes

(1) "Volunteering in India: Etiquette and Customs." Volunteering in India. [volunteeringinindia.org](http://www.volunteeringinindia.org). Accessed on 19 December 2008.

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Module 9 - Cultural Beliefs About Service

Western society generally teaches that those who have plenty should help those who are less fortunate than they are. Those who dedicate time to serving others are praised for their moral fibre, and even rewarded with tax exemptions. It may therefore come as a shock to many Westerners that not everyone shares this laudatory attitude toward community service.

“Beliefs about giving service also vary by culture. In some societies, those who give service to others often do so because of their religious beliefs. In India...the impetus for service comes from a desire to be self-sufficient in light of a colonial past, and in Denmark, a traditionally homogenous society, it is seen as a way of learning about the country’s new cultural diversity. In some societies, where the concept of “face” is important, the idea of receiving service from a stranger can be shameful—it can mean that you do not have an “in-group” to take care of you. For example, nursing homes don’t exist in many countries—families care for the elderly. Of course, that paradigm presupposes that someone, most likely a female member of the family, does not work outside the home. You may also find that the preponderant belief in some societies is that the government or some other group should take care of those in need, rather than individuals. When people in your host society react to the work you’re doing, either positively or negatively, try to put the reaction in a context—look around you, ask questions, and see if you can get some idea about their attitude toward service. What motivates people to serve? Do those who are being served feel shame, or do they see themselves as being in a temporary situation, or in a situation caused by forces for which they are not responsible?”(1)

The excerpt above only begins to reveal the complexity of the varying attitudes toward service. These attitudes are affected by family orientation, life patterns, notions of pride and shame, historical context, religious beliefs, collectivism versus individualism, attitudes toward change, societal class structures, and more. As a volunteer, you should recognize that your beliefs about service, like any other cultural beliefs, are not universal, and that you will have to develop an ethnorelative understanding of helping others. Refer to module 7 for more information on intercultural sensitivity and ethnorelativism.

[Go To Module 10: Cultural Beliefs About Medical Care >>](#)

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(1) Merrill, M. "What Assumptions Are In Your Suitcase?" 2005. Abroadview.org. Accessed on 19 December 2008. <http://www.abroadview.org/going/volunteer/merrill.htm>

Module 10 - Cultural Beliefs About Medical Care

Fear of doctors

Fear and distrust of doctors is a common barrier to health care in the developing world. This fear can be culture-specific, or simply a result of unfamiliarity. For many who do not seek regular medical attention, the health care system is an unknown which can be intimidating, regardless of culture.

"Fear appears to be a major barrier in the region... Most patients expressed fear of the hospital environment, staff and loss of pride and dignity rather than that of cataract surgery... Fear of the unknown appears to have played a major role in deciding on cataract surgery. In a study in Tanzania, it was reported that fear of the city, where to stay, what is going to happen when left alone in the hospital and similar fears far outweighed the perceived advantages of restored sight, among cataract patients." (1)

Although fear of the unfamiliar or of a poor prognosis can keep patients away in many cultures, there are some culture-specific stigmas associated with doctors and medicine that foreign health care volunteers must be aware of. In his research into Asian patients' distrust of Western medicine, Chen-Li Sung explains the importance of such awareness and understanding:

"Failure stems not from prejudice, but from a lack of understanding of, much less respect for, the systems of thought about health and illness which form the basis for the traditional or tradition-influenced Asian American patient's approach to illness.

"Noncompliant" patient behaviour is misunderstood if the physician does not grasp the roots of such behaviour in a system of beliefs which is not his own. Misunderstanding begets further "noncompliance," initiating a downward spiral. The way out of such spirals lies, I argue, in seeking a more adequate understanding of the patient's beliefs and their behavioural consequences." (2)

Cultural beliefs about medicine

Many Westerners view illness as a chance event or as a result of lifestyle choices, but it is important to realize that this way of thinking is not universal. A view commonly held abroad is that disease results from fate, punishment of sin, sorcery, or other supernatural

causes.(3) It is easy to see how patients who believe the cause of their disease is supernatural will fail to seek medical treatment, which is the attempt to cure the disease by natural means. Such beliefs about medical care in general extend to beliefs about eye care and the causes of blindness, as the following quotes illustrate:

“The education of the villagers is an entirely different issue altogether. Most of them do not think going to the hospital is necessary; they say that if they go blind, "Inshallah" ("It is God's will").”(4)

“A typical experience is that of a client who reported being asked by a member of her church congregation whom she knew well, "What did you do that God had to punish you so much?" Another common query is, "Why did this happen to me?" These and many similar questions are asked of and by blind people. Questions such as these illustrate the most common belief on the dark side of the dichotomy--that blindness is God's will or a punishment for some misbehaviour or moral or social failing.”(5)

“The folktales of India, Europe, Africa, and North America all tell of people being blinded for such transgressions as perjury, theft, rape, incest, adultery, abduction, and murder. In some cases, the sin being punished was committed by a distant relative... This belief is evident even today. For example, a highly educated woman of Italian descent stated her firm belief that her young son's visual impairment was caused by the sins of her robber-baron forebears. Occasionally, newly blind clients report the belief that visual impairment is a test by the powers that be that they must pass.”(6)

In their review of the folklore of blindness, Annie Wanger-Lampl and George Oliver also discuss the various myths and stigmas associated with blindness. In different cultures, blind people are viewed as magical, wise, evil, deathly, easily deceived, and more. As a foreign volunteer, it is helpful to understand the cultural beliefs that surround disease and medicine, as this will facilitate communication and understanding with local patients.

Balancing cultural sensitivity with safety and education

Part of being an effective volunteer requires setting aside ethnocentric ideas of superiority and learning to understand local attitudes toward health care. While Western medicine may be more technologically advanced, it is by no means the universal approach to health care, nor is it the undisputed “best” method. As a foreign volunteer, you may observe unfamiliar medical practices that seem inefficient, ineffective, or backwards to you, but such practices should never be dismissed or ridiculed. Local practitioners often have to take into account various local realities of which you are not aware. More importantly, respecting traditional practices is essential to relating to patients, as certain beliefs are integral to their lives and heritage.(7)

While it is important to be aware of the cultural implications of traditional healers versus local medical providers versus Western medical volunteers, some time-honoured traditional practices are not innocuous. One example of a harmful traditional treatment for cataracts is the process of couching.

“A popular practice that is thought to cure cataracts is "couching", a procedure that involves sticking a needle or any other sharpened object straight into the eye to dislodge the lens and therefore allow people who were once blind to now sense light. As one can imagine, couching is extremely harmful to eyes and mostly results in permanent damage that surgeries cannot fix. Traditional healers advocate this practice because they do not know or do not believe that cataract surgeries can restore people's vision; there is still a sense of distrust concerning Western medicine. As a result, Dr. Wanye's office is often

For more detailed information on professional, ethical, and successful volunteering, refer to the Unite For Sight international volunteering course:
www.uniteforsight.org/international-volunteering

[Go To Module 12: Reverse Culture Shock >>](#)

Footnotes

(1) “Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook,” p. 114. Peace Corps Information and Collection Exchange. www.peacecorps.gov. Accessed on 5 January 2009. <<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/culture/pdf/workbook.pdf>>

MODULE 12: Reverse Culture Shock

“What could be easier than going home? After all, you grew up in that culture, speak the language(s), understand how the system works, are familiar with how to cope with daily living, and have a ready-made support group. When you were homesick you dreamed how great it would be to be back in a comfortable and familiar place surrounded by family and friends. However, the reality is that returning home after a significant overseas experience is not without its stresses.”(1)

Culture shock is triggered by a sudden, drastic change in environment, so it makes sense that travellers will experience a second wave of culture shock upon returning home. The phases of “reverse culture shock” parallel the phases of the initial culture shock you will experience, though they will differ in length and intensity.

“While the phases may be quite similar, the timing and duration of them is not. For example, the honeymoon phase overseas might last a matter of days or weeks (even months), but at home the elation of return can dissolve rather quickly. Returnees can find themselves slipping into deepening hostility or withdrawal in very short time. While the onset of culture shock abroad usually takes many weeks or even months, reverse culture shock can take hold within hours of arriving home. There are many contributing factors that might intensify and accelerate the process during re-entry.”(2)

Phases of Reverse Culture Shock

The Honeymoon Phase: Upon returning, you can expect to experience an initial stage of euphoria and excitement. It will be a relief to come back, and invigorating to be surrounded by the comforts of home and people who are thrilled to see you. It won't be long, however, before you realize that both you and your home environment have changed, and the honeymoon phase will come to an end.

The Crisis Phase: The symptoms you experience during the crisis phases will parallel those you went through abroad; frustration, dejection, irritability and loneliness are just some of the emotions you may face. Many factors contribute to this most difficult phase of re-entry:

1. **Surprise:** One element of reverse culture shock that is different from the initial culture shock of travelling abroad is the element of surprise. When venturing to a new place with unfamiliar customs, language, and norms, most people expect to face some adjustment challenges. Home, on the other hand, is the place you know better than anywhere else, where you are comfortable, and where you fit in

naturally. Since there is no apparent reason to expect culture shock upon re-entry, the crisis phase comes as a shock to those who are unaware of reverse culture shock.

2. **Realities of home:** Home may not be what you expected it to be. While experiencing culture shock and homesickness abroad, you will likely idealize and romanticize your home environment. Upon returning, the imperfections and annoyances that you had forgotten about will no longer be invisible, which can be disconcerting.

“After [time] away, you think about what life is like in the States and how things work here -- you build up a lot of expectations and slightly flawed memories and you’re usually wrong, because your expectations are based on sort of a synthesized middle ground between the two cultures.” (3) -- Amy Portnoy, International Media Consultant

3. **Reverse homesickness:** While abroad, you will have developed a routine, adapted to a new way of living, and formed significant friendships. Leaving this behind will be difficult, especially if you don’t know when you will return.
4. **Changes in you and others:** Life doesn’t stop while you’re away, and things at home will be different when you return. The changes in your friends and environment may be subtle, or they may reveal themselves only under certain circumstances, which are usually unpredictable and therefore unsettling. (4) Because the home you left is not quite the home you are returning to, you may find yourself confused and anxious.

You will also begin to view your friends and family differently. It can be frustrating to find that they don’t think outside the “bubble” of their college, work, or community environment. Friends’ reactions to your return may also be disillusioning, particularly if they seem disinterested in your experience abroad.

“I had a very hard time readjusting to the US. I had changed so much and seen so many things, and I had a hard time relating to others and realizing that they had also changed during the time I was away. I was surprised that my friends didn’t really want to spend much time looking at my pictures and listening to my stories.” (5) -- University of Pennsylvania Student, Study abroad in Russia

On the other hand, many friends will be genuinely excited about listening to you recount your trip, but it will be difficult to fully articulate your experiences to them.

“‘Most people at home can’t relate to these experiences,’ says Eugene Patron, a Miami-based free-lance correspondent who spent most of 1991 in southern Africa. ‘Climbing a sand dune in Africa at sunrise gives you a feeling you can’t explain to someone who’s never done it and those feelings are yours alone. But that also means it’s difficult to relate the stories of your trip in a meaningful way.’” (6)

5. **Blindness to culture shock:** When you travel abroad, locals recognize you as a foreigner. People are understanding of your disorientation, and are quick to offer help. At home, on the other hand, you will be expected to be a fully functioning member of society. Because you look like you fit in, people will see no reason to reach out to you, and because reverse culture shock is not a well-recognized phenomenon, they will likely be less sympathetic to your adjustment needs.

“People will assume that, because you come from the same place as they do, you know how everything works. In fact some things may have changed in your absence. Because

you look and sound as if you 'belong,' people will be unaware that you are somewhat disoriented.”(7)

Recovery and Adjustment: Just as you will have recovered from your initial culture shock, you will begin to settle back into your native culture. Friendships may shift, and you may form new friendships with others who have had experiences similar to yours.(8) Most importantly, you will incorporate the changes that have occurred within you into your daily life at home. You will view the world through a slightly different lens, and will learn to appreciate aspects of your culture you never noticed before travelling abroad.

Coping with Re-entry(9)

Coping with culture shock abroad will have provided you the tools for dealing with the challenges of readjustment. For this reason and others, your reverse culture shock will be shorter lived than your initial adjustment abroad. That said, there are still some steps you can take to minimize hardship, and to maximize the positive impact of your time overseas.

1. **Before you come home, prepare:(10)** Reverse culture shock doesn't have to catch you by surprise. Plan to experience boredom, isolation, disorientation, and annoyance when you arrive home. You should also gather the contact information of friends you would like to stay in touch with abroad. If you nurture a connection with your host country while you are at home, you will be less likely to compartmentalize or “shoebox” your abroad experience. Along the same lines, you should spend some time reflecting on meaningful aspects of your trip to help integrate your experience abroad into your identity. What did you learn? How have you changed? Answering these questions will help you process the meaning of your trip as you reintegrate yourself at home.

“Few students are actually aware of the degree to which the overseas experience may have changed their way of thinking and acting. Many of these changes are subtle and unconscious. Still they represent cross-cultural skills or attitudes they may have acquired as a part of their sojourn. Usually, it takes a while after returning from study abroad to realize the full extent of the impact.”(11)

2. **Talk with people who can relate to you:** Keep in touch with people from your program in addition to your hosts; they understand the experiences you went through, and may share your difficulties readapting to their homes. Friends who have had other significant experiences abroad are also great resources, and are likely to be interested in your trip and easy to relate to.
3. **Stay international!** Keep up-to-date with current events in your host country, join an international students organization, study a foreign language, and attend multicultural festivals. Anything you do to maintain your connection with the world at large will solidify the significance of your trip. Also remember that you can maximize your impact as a volunteer by inspiring others once you return home. Writing articles for a local newspaper, creating a photo exhibit, speaking at student events on campus, and organizing fundraisers are just a few of the ways you can increase awareness and galvanize others to help those living in poverty abroad.

Footnotes

<http://www.uniteforsight.org/cultural-competency/> (accessed 5/02/09)

(1) “Back Home: Neither Here nor There.” Module 2.3 in What’s Up With Culture? University of the Pacific. Accessed on 6 January 2009.
<<http://www.pacific.edu/sis/culture/>>

(2) Ibid.

(3) Selby, N. “Retroschock: When the Familiar Is Unfamiliar.” 7 January 2004. PCOL Magazine. Peacecorpsonline.org. Accessed on 6 January 2009.
<<http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/2629/2020247.html>>

(4) “Back Home: Neither Here nor There.”

(5) “Beating Reverse Culture Shock.” 2003. Natavi Guides: Students Helping Students. Accessed on 6 January 2009.
<http://www.studentshelpingstudents.com/studyabroad_revcultshock.html>

(6) Selby, 2004.

(7) “Culture Shock – Canada.” British Expatriot Wiki. Britishexpats.com. Accessed on 6 January 2009. <http://britishexpats.com/wiki/Culture_Shock-Canada>

(8) Ibid.

(9) “Reentry Shock.” Northeastern University Office of International Study Programs.” Accessed on 6 January 2009. <http://www.northeastern.edu/oisp/step3/reentry_shock/>

(10) Back Home: Neither Here nor There.”