

Culture Shock

By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Most of us are familiar with the term "culture shock". We may think of it as the temporary disorientation that comes from being exposed to a different language, different customs, food, etc. What we don't often realize is that it is usually a rather profound reaction to fairly significant other differences; in the way people view the world, in the way they think and what they value. Tourists often experience culture shock at a superficial level. People who actually live in another culture can experience culture shock as an on-going reaction and adaptation to basic differences. Rotary Youth Exchange Students, living and studying in a different culture, living in the homes of host families, often experience significant culture shock, sometimes on a continuous basis, throughout their stay abroad.

Most exchange students in year-long programs go through a fairly identifiable progression of adjustment to culture shock, although each student's experience is unique. It must be emphasized that while culture shock can be very uncomfortable, there is nothing wrong with it, or with the person experiencing it. It is also quite common for students to have a very positive and rewarding experience, despite having on-going adjustment problems with culture shock. Many would argue that the most rewarding exchanges come only when there is a pronounced experience of culture shock.

Culture shock usually involves at least four stages. It is quite common for these stages to repeat themselves as students become more and more successfully immersed in the host culture. These stages are:

1. Excitement and Enthusiasm. This is the feeling of excitement and enthusiasm that accompanies travel to a new place, seeing and doing so many new and different things, and meeting new people. It is most prominent at the beginning of the exchange year, but can repeat itself as students continue to have new experiences, like changing host families, meeting new students, or continued travel. Sometimes it can be the excitement that comes from developing a new skill or increased understanding of the host culture.

2. Irritability. This is the stage most readily associated with culture shock and occurs when the initial excitement wears off and real differences become evident. These are differences that go beyond food and language, and they are often indescribable to the person experiencing them. No matter how understanding and accepting the student may try to be, there will be many times when they just don't like or understand why their host culture is the way it is, and they can't seem to make the feeling go away. Irritability can come at any time that a student is confronted with differences they may not have experienced or perceived previously.

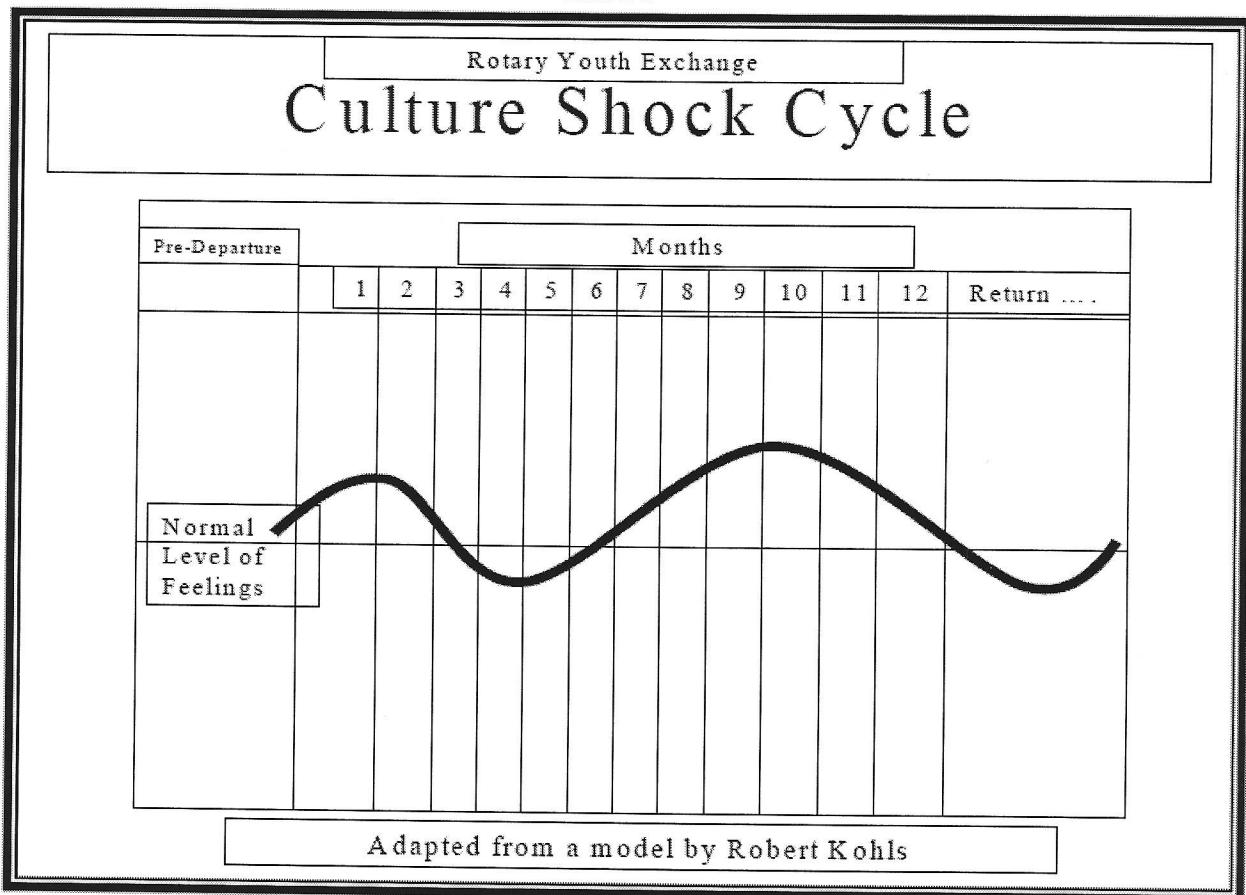
3. Adaptation. This is the longest, most difficult and most rewarding stage. This is when students learn to accept that they will have to adapt if they are going to be successful in their host culture. They work at adapting to customs and habits that they may not understand, and may not like. Sometimes even when they try very hard, they have difficulty, because so much of this adaptation depends on learning the native language. They know they are adjusting when they begin to think and speak using idiomatic expressions (expressions that have meaning beyond a literal translation). They know they are adjusting when they notice that they are doing things without thinking, and these are the very things they never thought they could become comfortable with. An example would be when someone from a very formal culture becomes comfortable standing very close to other people, frequently touching them and being touched, during a conversation. Adaptation is a continuous process, and it requires added attention as some of these newly discovered differences become apparent to the student.

4. Biculturalism. This stage comes very near the end of the stay, or sometimes doesn't really emerge until the student returns to their native countries. This is when they realize that they have become competent in another culture, and can see the world and function from another, very different point of view. When this

stage emerges toward the end of the exchange year, it all seems very unfair to the student. Just as they are getting to experience the benefits of really knowing how to function well in their host culture, they have to go back home.

In **Table 1** below, a model of a typical year of adaptation and adjustment to culture shock is pictured. The bold line that waves up and down represents the high and low feelings that students experience as they go through the various stages of adjustment to culture shock.

Table 1



The first few months, including the period just before departure, coincide with the initial excitement stage. This peaks when the excitement wears off, or what is sometimes referred to as the time when the “honeymoon” is over. This is when reality sets in. This is when differences beyond superficial ones emerge, and irritability sets in, often verily quickly. At times, however, this irritability can come fairly slowly, but it is almost inevitable as the confrontation of one’s own ethnocentrism occurs.

The lowest point typically comes at about four months, or near the middle of December, for students who start their exchange in August. For Christian students, this also coincides with what is probably the first Christmas they have spent away from their families. As a result, there is a sort of double negative of culture shock and homesickness.

Following the irritability stage is the much longer stage of gradual adjustment and adaptation where the student really learns the cultural tools necessary to function competently in the host country. This stage can

actually involve the recycling of prior stages, with deeper and deeper understanding following periods of confusion, frustration and irritation.

The final stage, shown as coming around the time of returning home, can involve another plunge into a period of feeling low. If the student is not already sad at the prospect of returning home, “just when it’s getting good”, they will almost inevitably feel sad shortly after they return, when they go through a “reverse culture shock”. This phenomenon is less well understood, and less often anticipated, but just as common as initial culture shock. The degree to which students go through reverse culture shock is a rough measure of the success of their immersion in the host culture, and not a sign that something is wrong. Only after experiencing reverse culture shock can students really appreciate the extent to which they have changed, and, as a result, the extent to which they have become truly bicultural.

The journey through culture shock has also been described as moving from **Ethnocentrism** to **Ethnorelativism**. All cultures are ethnocentric. They teach their members that their way is the right, natural and preferred way of doing things. When someone is exposed to another culture, with different values, behaviors and beliefs, there is a tendency to respond with defensiveness, labeling one’s own practices as right and the other culture as wrong, silly or even stupid. Ethnorelativism is the awareness that develops as one realizes there are other valid ways of dealing with the world – whether we agree with them or not. When the exchange student gets through the initial denial (which is what happens in the irritability stage) they can begin to develop the skills necessary to adapt and be competent in the new culture. They then develop an ethnorelative world view. Their thinking may follow this progression:

1. I don’t like the way they do this – it’s stupid.
2. But they seem to be doing o.k. doing it this way.
3. If I want to survive here, I’d better learn to do it this way.
4. Now that I can do it this way, it doesn’t seem so bad, even though I may still prefer to do it my way.

Developing the competence to succeed in another culture – that is – going through the process of culture shock, may be better understood by analyzing the process of developing competence at anything. Essentially, we go through four stages:

1. Unconscious Incompetence. This is a stage when we not only don’t know how to do something, we don’t even know that we don’t know how to do it. We are ignorant. Most of us think we know the proper way to greet someone. For example, when we go to another culture where greetings are done quite differently, we may just breeze along doing it our way, not even knowing that what we are doing may be perceived as rude or insulting.
2. Conscious Incompetence. In this stage we may be aware that we are doing something wrong, but we just may not have the skills yet to do it properly. We may know that another culture spends more time in greetings inquiring about one’s relatives, but if we are not skilled at the language, we may have trouble doing it, even if we want to.
3. Conscious Competence. In this stage we have developed the necessary skills to do what is necessary, but we still have to consciously remind ourselves to do it. We may think it is a waste of time to stop and discuss the well-being of all of our family members when we greet a friend, but we know how to, and more importantly, we know it is important to do so in this culture in order to appear “civilized” and polite.
4. Unconscious Competence. In this stage we have become so skilled at the new cultural behavior that we do it without thinking. We may find that it becomes very natural to stop and chat with friends as we greet them, inquiring about the mutual health of both families, as if it is the most natural thing in the world to do.

When exchange students get to this point – unconscious competence, they have gotten to the bicultural stage of adjustment to culture shock. They have developed an effective ethnorelative world view. So one can see that culture shock is not a problem to avoid. Instead, it is a necessary discomfort that one must go through to really experience the rich and varied joys of intercultural living.