

Cultural Adjustment

Culture Shock

We are surrounded by elements in our own culture that influence who we are and how we relate to the world. Because we have grown up with this culture, we are comfortable with it. Our values and attitudes have been shaped by our experiences in our native culture. What happens when we suddenly lose cues and symbols that orient us to situations of daily life? What happens when facial expressions, gestures, and words are no longer familiar? The psychological discomfort one feels in a foreign situation is commonly known as culture shock.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment Cycle

Each stage in this process is characterized by “symptoms” or outward and inward signs representing certain kinds of behavior.

- **Honeymoon Period:** Initially, you will probably be fascinated and excited by everything new. Visitors are at first elated to be in a new culture.
- **Culture Shock:** The visitor is immersed in new problems: housing, transportation, food, language, and new friends. Fatigue may result from continuously trying to comprehend and use the second language. You may wonder, “Why did I come here?”
- **Initial Adjustment:** Everyday activities such as housing and going to school are no longer major problems. Although the visitor may not yet be perfectly fluent in the language spoken, basic ideas and feelings in the second language can be expressed.
- **Mental Isolation:** Individuals have been away from their families and good friends for a long period of time and may feel lonely. Many still feel they cannot express themselves as well as they can in their native language. Frustrations and sometimes a loss of self-confidence result. Some individuals remain at this stage.
- **Acceptance and Integration:** A routine (e.g., work, school, social life) has been established. The visitor has accepted the habits, customs, food, and characteristics of the friends, associates and the language of the country.

Return Anxiety, Re-entry Shock, Reintegration

While these stages play an important role in a visitors’ adaptation to a new culture, many students are surprised to experience the very same feelings upon reentry to the U.S. Re-entry shock can be even more difficult than the initial culture shock because it is so unexpected.

Suggestions for Dealing with Culture Shock

- Try to look for logical reasons why things happen. This may help you view your host culture in a more positive light.
- Be slow to judge; observe first, show respect, and invite conversation. Try not

to dwell on the negative things about your host culture, and don't hang around with people who do.

- Explore! Get a sense for the physical environment, look for parks, sports facilities, bus stops, etc. Get a sense for the behavioral norms; how do they greet each other, wait in line, etc. Find out where people meet and socialize. Make an effort to go to those places.
- Try to fit into a rhythm of life in your host culture. Adjust to their time schedule for meals and work. Read local newspapers and books.
- Keep your sense of humor!
- Set small goals for yourself, as high expectations may be difficult to meet.
- Speak the language of the country you are in, and don't worry if you only know a few phrases.
- Take care of yourself by exercising, getting enough sleep, eating properly, and doing things you enjoy.
- Keep in touch with friends and family at home.
- Draw on your personal resources for handling stress. You've done it many times before, and you can do it again.

Communicating Across Cultures

There are a number of skills and guidelines that can be suggested for communicating successfully in cross-cultural situations:

- **Pay Attention.** Clear your mind of its various preoccupations so you can concentrate on what is being said. Remember that there is no point in talking if you cannot pay (or receive) attention. If you cannot, try to postpone the conversation.
- **Set your assumptions and values aside** and try to hear not just what the other person is saying but what is meant by what was said. (This may require asking many questions.) It is easier to understand if you set aside your ideas and try to explore theirs thoroughly.
- **Withhold judgment.** You will have more success in communicating with other people if you are trying to understand them rather than to evaluate them.
- **Be complete and explicit.** Be ready to explain your point in more than one way and why you are trying to make a particular point in the first place. Give the background; provide the context; make clear "where you are coming from".

- **Pay attention to the other person's response.** You can usually tell whether you have blundered or failed to make yourself clear by taking time to notice the other person's verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- **Paraphrase.** After the other person has spoken, restate what you heard the other person say and what you thought was meant. You can say something like this: "As I understand it, you are saying. . . . Is that correct?" This can help avoid situations where you and the other person assign different meanings to the same word or phrase.
- **Ask for verification.** After you have spoken, try to get confirmation that you have been understood. As the other person to restate what you have said. It does not usually work to ask the other person, "Do you understand?" Most people will say "yes" whether they understand or not.
- **Be alert for different meanings** being assigned to certain words, phrases, or actions. Sometimes you will think you are understanding what the other person is saying and suddenly realize you do not.
- **Do not ask questions you would not or could not answer yourself.** If you do not want to tell the other person about your sex life, for example, don't ask them about theirs.
- **Analyze communicative behavior.** Learn to be aware not just of what is being said in a communication situation but also of what is happening in the situation. Here are some aspects of the communication process that it helps to watch: Does your conversation partner seem to be paying attention? Are you paying attention yourself? Do you both appear to understand each other's meanings? If you become aware of the way the communication process works, you will be able to more readily identify breakdowns.
- **When you are having trouble communicating, talk about the trouble you are having.** Using phrases such as "I don't understand that point" or "Let me explain why I'm telling you this", you can focus your attention on the process of communication within the group rather than on the topic you were discussing.

Special Student Issues

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues

Attitudes toward sexuality vary greatly from country to country. Some cultures are open about homosexuality, and strong gay communities exist in many cities; however, some cultures and peoples are intolerant of different sexual preferences, and strict taboos or laws against such relationships may exist. We encourage you to find out how different sexual preferences are viewed overseas and where your support may exist, so that your time overseas can be as enriching as possible. Consult your program director for more information on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues in your destination country. For additional resources, contact the ISU Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Student Services office.

Students of Color

No two students studying abroad ever have quite the same experience, even in the same program and country. This same variety is true for students of color. Reports from past participants vary from those who felt exhilarated by being free of the American context of race relations, to those who experienced different degrees of ‘innocent’ curiosity about their ethnicity, to those who felt familiar and new types of prejudice. Try to find others on campus who have studied abroad and can provide you with some counsel. For additional resources, contact the ISU Multicultural Student Affairs office.

Students with Disabilities

Many of the disability accommodations or services that are provided at U.S. universities may be different or unavailable overseas. You should try to arrange for any disability accommodations at overseas sites before you depart. Receiving accommodations once you are abroad will be more difficult and may not be possible. Disclosing accommodation needs does not influence your acceptance into a program, and it is to your advantage to be certain that accommodation you need will be available. For additional resources, contact the ISU Disability Resources office.

Knowing Iowa and ISU

As you travel, people will want to know where you’re from and what it’s like to live here. How well do you know Iowa and Iowa State University? Here are some hints:

How many people live in Iowa? About 2.9 million (30th state in population).

How big is Iowa? About 56,290 square miles (23rd in land area).

What’s the largest city? Des Moines, with 196,917.

What’s the racial make-up of Iowa? About 93% white, 2% black, 4% Hispanic.

What percent of Iowa’s land is cultivated? 95%, more than any other state!

What are some Iowa products? Tractors and farm equipment, agricultural products, food, grain (Iowa ranks first in the nation in pork, corn, and soybean production).

What is the average size of an Iowa farm? 325 acres.

Is Iowa in any movies? *Twister*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Bridges of Madison County* were filmed here.

What is the climate like? The average temperature in January is 25 F, in July 86 F; Iowa averages 31 inches of snow and 33 inches of rain each year.

How old is ISU? About 150 years.

How much does it cost for a non-resident to study at ISU each year?

About \$16,000.

Name some famous ISU graduates. George Washington Carver, John Atanasoff, Christian Peterson, Carrie Chapman Catt, Henry Wallace, Griffith Buck.

How many majors does ISU offer? Over 100.

ISU is part of the prestigious Association of American Universities; how many other U.S. and Canadian institutions are included? 62.

How many students attend ISU? About 26,000.

What percentage are international students? 12%.

How many faculty and staff are employed at ISU? 1800 faculty, 4300 staff.

What grade point average is needed to graduate from ISU? 2.00.

What are ISU's intercollegiate sports? Basketball (men and women), cross-country (men and women), football (men), golf (men and women), gymnastics (women), softball (women), soccer (women), swimming (men and women), tennis (women), track and field (men and women), volleyball (women), wrestling (men).

Re-Entry

- Just as you will have to brace yourself for a period of psychological disorientation when you leave the U.S., you should know that after your time abroad you might also have to prepare yourself for a parallel period of readjustment when you return home.
- Before you return home, prepare yourself for the adjustment by connecting with family and friends. Also, find out what's happening in the U.S. Stations such as CNN are available worldwide, and many newspapers (including the *ISU Daily*) are available on the World-Wide Web.
- It takes time to get used to being back home, and it can be quite stressful. Do not try to jump back into your old life. If possible, give yourself a few "transitional" days to relax and reflect before returning to a busy schedule.
- Acknowledge re-entry as a part of your overseas experience. It is easier to deal with the mood swings that often accompany reverse culture shock if you are aware that it is normal to have these feelings. Almost all returnees experience some adjustment difficulties.
- **Situation:** You may feel confused, especially during the first few weeks after your return, because the values, attitudes, and lifestyles you learned while abroad conflict with those back home.
Recommendation: Differences in cultural patterns require time to explore and understand. Take time to evaluate both cultural perspectives before deciding on your preferences and integrating them into your lifestyle.
- **Situation:** Family and friends at home may not seem interested in hearing about your experiences abroad.
Recommendation: Realize that they may be adjusting to changes that have taken place in you. They may never have had an experience comparable to yours and so may have difficulty relating to it. Be patient and seek out other returnees who can help put your experience in perspective.
- **Situation:** Friends and family may treat you as the same person you were before you left, without recognizing the changes you have been through. As a

result of these changes, however, you feel a need for new or modified personal relationships that acknowledge the new dimensions of your personality.

Recommendation: Remember that your friends and family may not have been expecting you to change. They may be uncertain about how you feel and how you have grown. Discuss your feelings with them and try to encourage positive changes in old relationships. Also, seek out new friends who are compatible with who you have become.

Additional Re-entry Adjustment Advice

- If you do find that you are experiencing a great deal of stress, practice stress management techniques: exercise, maintain a healthy diet, get plenty of rest, etc.
- Keep a journal. This will help you make sense out of what you are feeling, how you have changed, and what you have gained from your time abroad.
- Keep in contact with the friends you made in your host country through phone calls, letters, e-mail, etc.
- Continue to explore the new hobbies and interests you developed abroad. Look for ways to use new skills you may have acquired in your host country. Integrate the new you with the old.
- Find ways to share your experience with others. Make yourself available to advise other students who will be studying abroad in your host country, and befriend exchange students from your host country. Remember that they are going through the same process of culture shock and adjustment that you did while abroad. You can learn a lot from one another and help each other in the process. Join clubs or organizations that have ties to your host country or that have an international focus.
- If you find that you miss your host country, see films, eat food, and listen to music, etc., from that country. Also, look at your photo albums and reread your travel journal.
- Remember the importance of having a support system. It is particularly helpful to form a support group of people who have been through similar experiences. Get together regularly and discuss your time spent abroad and your feelings about being back home. If you still find you are having a great deal of difficulty, seek help for a counselor, psychologist, or study abroad advisor knowledgeable in this area.
- Plan to use your experience abroad as a marketable skill. Transferable skills include working with diverse work teams, demonstrating flexibility, solving problems creatively, dealing well with change, taking initiative, willingness to take risks, demonstrating sensitivity to people from other cultural backgrounds, willingness to travel.
- Be patient! Re-entry may take some time, but most returnees find the process to be a valuable experience leading to personal growth and increased self-knowledge.