

CULTURE SHOCK OF STUDYING ABROAD - NEW TRENDS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL SKILLS -

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Abstract

In a multicultural world, where students and professionals have numerous opportunities to travel for business and academic reasons, a set of skills for coping with culture shock is absolutely mandatory. Starting from an understanding of Hofstede's definition of culture as "the collective programming of the human mind", and continuing with Lysgaard's U-curve of Culture Shock, the present study offers solutions for coping with adaptation problems in a new cultural environment.

Based on a set of interviews with international students that experienced the U curve and the W-curve of culture shock, during their international study programs, we will be able to offer better solutions for the problems encountered while being away from the cultural comfort zone.

Keywords: *Hofstede, U-curve of culture shock, intercultural dimensions, international study programs*

JEL Classification: Z10

I. Introduction

The modern academic world has recently become a space for the development of young international individuals, travelling all over the world for tourism reasons mainly, but also for educational reasons. It means that more and more students apply for international programs, and spend a minimum of one semester, up to an entire three/ four-year bachelor program abroad. Particularly in the case of Romanian students we can observe an increasing trend among high school graduates to apply directly for European bachelor programs. Thus, the demands of academia increased dramatically, requiring further specialization/ level of adjustment to international environments, for the students.

But a better understanding of the triggers for this increasing trend, among high school graduates, needs an understanding of the definition of culture, of cultural differences and only then an understanding of culture shock and the ways we can overcome its effects.

I always view the definition of culture starting from Geert Hofstede's definition as the "collective programming of the human mind", that distinguishes its members according to their level of specialization and their ability to master intercultural environments (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5).

I consider that culture can be learned, and our programming, from an early age, when we are taught the cultural norms and values, dictates us how to behave in new and different environments. It is the case with most Romanian-American University students, who apply for international Erasmus programs, which can last from three months up to nine months abroad.

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Along the present study I will make reference to particular cases of students who applied for international programs and spent one or two semesters abroad, but I will also refer to the specific case of a student who decided to return home after a month spent on her international Erasmus program in Holland, due to her inability to adjust to the norms and values of the new host culture, which she considered too distant and too low context, compared to the one that she left, and thus she was unable to cope with culture shock.

Starting from the definition of culture shock, by explaining the stages of the U-curve of culture shock and explaining the symptoms that students can suffer during their international student exchange programs, we will try to understand how Romanian students cope with all these elements and, if possible, understand if students need further guidance on the type of country or culture that they should apply for, in order to avoid the effects of culture shock.

II. From Culture to Culture Shock

Leopold Gutierrez considers that culture is the way in which we are able to engage in relations with other people, “providing a combination of intermediate patterns which channel our feelings and thoughts, making us react in a particular way, different from those who have been submerged in different patterns”. (Gutierrez, 1973, p. 17)

We can thus understand that a community creates a set of shared norms and values that are taken for granted in the interaction with other individuals. If this set of norms and values differs in other cultural contexts, individuals sometimes are not able to efficiently cope with them.

When a student or an adult decides to move abroad, for educational or professional reasons, he/ she may expect to be impacted by culture shock, which is actually the result of being exposed to a cultural environment that he/ she may not be very familiar with.

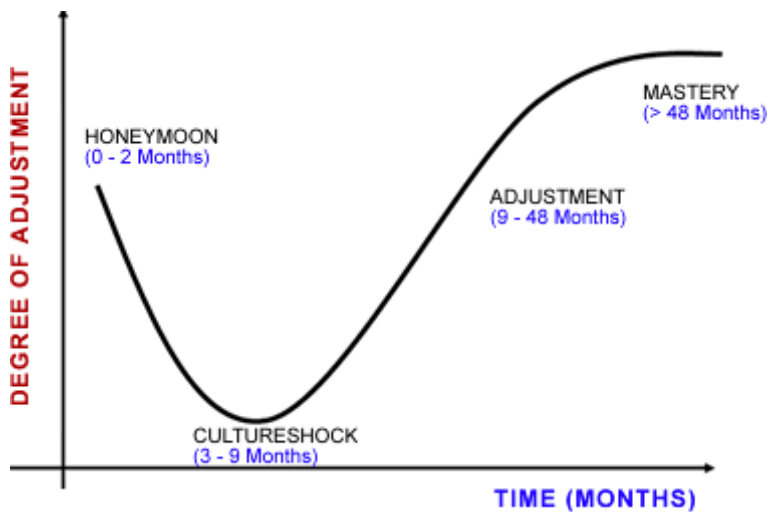


Fig. 1 U-Curve of Culture Shock, Sverre Lysgaard, 1955

In the specialized literature, the term *culture shock* appeared in the 1950s, when it was postulated by the American anthropologist Cora DuBois, who used the notion to define the state of confusion that anthropologists experienced, when coping with a new cultural environment. Later on, in 1954, Kalervo Oberg, the Finnish anthropologist who used his personal experience as expat, travelling for studies and work all over the world, expanded DuBois concept, by applying it to all people experiencing an international distress, caused by removal from the comfort of the home

culture. But in 1955 it was Sverre Lysgaard, the Norwegian sociologist who used the four terms (honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery) to define the stages that can impact the state of mind and behavior of people who experience the discomfort of living abroad. He also explained the exact periods of time that humans can experience the different stages of culture shock.

What researchers suggest is that any human, deciding to move abroad for work or education, needs to become acquainted with the new culture, be informed about cultural differences, perceptions, attitudes, etc., and be prepared with a set of realistic expectations about the country and people that he/she will meet.

At the same time, it is important to inform sojourners that a certain level of stress is absolutely normal in any given change a human's life, and that frustration and confusion are part of the adaptation process.

III. Analysis of culture shock stages – case study

It is the case of my student, enrolled with the Marketing bachelor program who, in her second year of studies, applied for an international Erasmus semester at Fontys International Business School, in Holland, with the campus in Venlo. After the two-week cultural immersion program, that she had to follow with the international office of the Dutch university, she was helped to find an appropriate accommodation, in an international students' dorm building.

Unfortunately, coming from a high context culture, as the Romanian one is, where information is explicitly communicated with words, which are put in context, which is stated from the beginning and details are included in a holistic picture, the student was not able to cope with the demands of a very low context culture, as the Dutch one is, where personal relations and speech are compartmentalized, and showing an evident preference for main points, and ending with details. (Nunez, Mahdi, Popma, 2014, p. 24-25)

In only a couple of weeks she reached the angry stage, or the culture shock, at the bottom of the U-curve, where all symptoms (anger, tiredness, exhaustion, depression) became evident. Because of her lack of experience, she very quickly reached the angry stage of denial, refusal to adapt to the new environment, inability to cope with the cultural differences and felt as if she failed in some way. That is why she decided to come back, return the financial grant she was offered, and continue her studies in Romania.

Unfortunately, the entire experience had an overall negative impact upon her future activity, because on her return home, even though she only spent a month in Holland, she entered in a rapid stage of re-entry shock and needed months to get accustomed to her home environment and be able to cope with the demands of her national system of education.

I consider that unfortunate situations like the above-mentioned one can be avoided, through a careful preparation of the students for the international experience, through a process of selection that takes into consideration the psychological state of mind of the students and an understanding of the triggers behind their desperate need to study abroad, a very tough language selection, because "competence in the language of the host culture is stressed in the literature as very important for the adjustment process" (Zapf, 1991, p. 114), or at least a guidance of the students towards those host countries where cultural differences and barriers are not very high, as in the particular case of Dutch culture.

However difficult or disappointing this example is, we have to admit that most of the students travelling abroad for studies have successful stories to tell, on their return back home. Because adaptability is in human nature and most of the time members of the young generation have the potential to adjust to new environments, even to the hostile ones, where cultural differences are very abrupt.

As literature suggests, the overall state of the mind of the student is very important, because in certain situations certain levels of stress can become a motivating stimulus for excellent

academic performance and culture shock represents only a stage in a transition process towards the maturing process of the individual. It is indeed very important that the student is not alone, but part of a group of international students, where at least one or two have the same nationality as the one experiencing culture shock. Refusal to interact with members of the same nationality will only deepen the state of desperation and will increase the state of depression.

In this sense, I have more successful stories, of students who decided to apply in small groups for international programs. There is the case of two young girls, enrolled with the Management program, who applied together for a semester in Portugal, at the University of Porto, who coped very well with culture shock. On the one hand, it was due to the fact that they were together, which helped them overcome cultural differences, and on the other hand, the fact that they applied for a country where the language belongs to the family of Latin languages helped a lot.

There is an even more interesting case of two other girls, students enrolled with the same Marketing program, who applied together for a Dutch university. The level of English of one of the girls was extremely low, compared to the demands of the academic program, but the culture shock helped her overcome even her personal limitations, and supported by her colleague, who was also her roommate, she was able to pass all her exams, integrate easily among international students and even consider a future master program in Holland, upon graduation of the bachelor program in Romania.

Compared to these situations, international students studying in Romania have a totally different profile and cope differently with culture shock. If Romanian students usually apply for Erasmus programs in Western countries, most of the international students coming to Romania are from middle-eastern countries, conflict zones or Muslim countries, where the cultural background deeply impacts the overall behavior of the human being.

They have the tendency of standing in the angry stage longer than people belonging to other cultures, because of their refusal to engage and interact with local people. At the same time, it is due to the fact that in many situations their level of English does not allow them to engage in complex conversations with local people that create a real barrier between them and the other members of the academic group. In the particular case of students coming from middle-eastern countries, we have to acknowledge the fact that, for example in Bucharest, there is a large community that they can engage with, and thus the need for an interaction with local people becomes almost superfluous.

IV. Conclusion

Culture shock is a process, and as all processes it has an initial phase, but also a final one. When mastering a culture, it means that the individual was able to cope with all the difficulties, starting from getting acquainted with an environment, new people, new food, new language and religion. And as Fons Trompenaars suggested, culture refers to the way we are able to deal with difficult situations and solve problems. Thus, psychologists recommend specialized advice and counseling once the symptoms of culture shock appear in young adults studying abroad.

As human beings, we are equipped with sensitivity and we are endowed with cultural empathy. These two important tools help us adjust to context and situation and move between different frames of reference, without losing our identity.

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