Podcast series: Preparing for your Undergraduate Time Abroad

Part II – Preparing for Culture Shock

In the first podcast about preparing for your time abroad, we thought about some of the feelings and ideas you might have about this. In this second podcast, we'll focus on the common experience of culture shock that many go through once they arrive. We'll cover some of the things you can do to plan ahead in order to mitigate the effects of culture shock and in podcast three, we'll think about how you might go about addressing any other worries or concerns that you might have about going overseas.

First, though, you might like to reflect on whether you feel you've experienced culture shock before. This might be when going abroad on holiday, / perhaps having lived abroad before, or maybe moving from abroad to come to school or University here in the UK. Even just starting at the University of Oxford can feel like a bit of a foreign experience for a fair few people, with its own language, customs and traditions, values, and ways of doing things. So what previous experiences come to mind for you when you reflect on the idea of culture shock?

You might want to have a think more generally about what you already know about yourself and how you handle new experiences, novel environments, and periods of transition or change. What do you envisage you might find interesting or straight-forward, and what might you find more challenging, or possibly even disturbing, about your time abroad? You might want to pause the podcast for a moment to think about these things.

So, now that you've had some initial thoughts about any experiences of culture shock you might already have had, and how you deal with change more generally, it might be helpful to know that there are usually thought to be at least four main stages of culture shock – broadly divided into the honeymoon stage, the negotiation stage, the adjustment stage, and the adaptation or acceptance stage. These four stages can in total take up to anything from a few months to a year to traverse, although the process might be quicker for some people than for others. Don't worry if, when you go abroad, it takes you a bit longer than you'd like it to or a bit longer than it seems to for other people – everyone is different, and there are no prizes for being first. Plus it's important to bear in mind that, like many other emotional experiences, culture shock doesn't always proceed in a straight line, so it's possible you'll feel as if you're on a bit of a roller coaster to start off with, and it's important to remember that that's not unusual. You're likely to feel more tired, to feel a bit irritable and perhaps at times, more emotional. You might even get a bit ill, although this is not the case for everyone. Hopefully, though, if these slightly turbulent feelings are something you do experience, you'll be able to keep this podcast in mind and to recognise that these initial ups and downs are all a pretty normal part of the experience of studying, working, or travelling abroad.

So let's think in more detail about these four main stages of culture shock that people usually go through. The honeymoon stage of culture shock, as the name suggests, usually occurs soon after you arrive in your new destination, and is often an enjoyable period when it's not unusual to feel quite excited and hopeful about the culture in which you find yourself. That's not to say that you won't also find some things strange or stressful, or that you won't feel a bit homesick at times, and perhaps miss those closest to you. But you're likely at this stage to be feeling open to exploring new things, not to mention feeling quite curious and intrigued by the culture, places, and new people you'll be coming across.

At some point, however, this perhaps rather intoxicating stage of the culture shock process inevitably comes to an end with what is often a more difficult phase - the negotiation stage. This can

be a period of exhaustion and frustration, as you come to terms with different ways of doing things which might initially have seemed intriguing, but which might now feel incomprehensible or at times, just plain annoying. The refrain, 'But why do they do it like *that'* can be a frequent one, and you might find yourself complaining more than you usually do. Depending on your destination and when your time abroad commences, this more challenging stage might also coincide with darker evenings and more wintry weather, and this combination can be particularly tough.

Nevertheless, by recognising that this stage *is* difficult, and by remembering to be kind to yourself, with plenty of treats, good food, good sleep, some physical exercise (unless there are medical reasons not to), some social connection with others, some time to reflect, and perhaps some additional support, if you feel you need it, you can usually begin to come to terms with these challenges and to find ways around any practical or emotional difficulties you might be experiencing.

In the third phase of culture shock, the adjustment stage, you are likely to find yourself adapting to your new environment, with certain aspects starting to feel a bit more familiar and hopefully less alien or challenging. You might begin to feel slightly more confident and more able to establish a better daily routine. Certain people and places are likely to start to feel more a part of your world, and you might find yourself having a bit more energy. Rather like 'false friends' in language learning, however, although some aspects of the new culture might begin to feel familiar, they might also suddenly trip you up, occasionally turning out to have very different meanings or connotations from those you might have anticipated. You might feel you've just got your head round a particular custom or set of values, only to find that there are further nuances and layers that you need to work at understanding. Or maybe you realise that something you thought was 'just how things are' for all human beings is actually quite specific to your own national, ethnic, or other cultural background. These sudden reversals can sometimes make you feel a bit wobbly, as if you're in a game of snakes and ladders which can suddenly take you right back to the beginning again, just as you thought you were getting somewhere. But by this stage, you will hopefully have realised that it's not a matter of winning or losing, but rather of learning to take things in your stride. So even if you do still sometimes misunderstand things from time to time, and experience some ups and downs which can suddenly knock your self-confidence and make you feel a bit like a beginner again, you will hopefully be starting to recognise that both the set-backs and the more positive experiences are likely to be contributing to the progress in understanding and adaptation that you will already have made.

Finally, during the adaptation or acceptance stage of culture shock, you're likely to have begun to adjust reasonably successfully to your new circumstances and, whilst you might not always like or understand everything, you will probably be able to acknowledge what you consider to be both the positive and negative aspects of the culture in which you're living. You might even find certain aspects of the culture you're getting to know preferable to elements of your own – something you might not have anticipated at all during the earlier, more challenging stages of culture shock. You might find yourself developing different preferences and values, or even starting to behave in ways you might not have anticipated. This might be anything from taking a more critical perspective on your own cultural background, to unconsciously changing the way you walk or the extent to which you smile in public, for example, so as to fit in with local cultural expectations! These adaptations can be both pleasing and disconcerting, so again, it's about allowing yourself some time and space to notice any changes, being kind to yourself, and giving yourself plenty of praise and rewards for all the progress you're making, even if it doesn't always feel like it!

As well as realising that you're likely to go through these different stages of culture shock at your own unique pace and in your own particular way, do try to continue to keep in mind that roller-coaster experience we mentioned earlier. The overall direction of travel tends to be from stage one

to stage four of culture shock, from the honeymoon stage, via the negotiation and adjustment stages, to the eventual acceptance stage, but it's not unusual to go backwards and forwards between these different phases for several months, sometimes oscillating quite rapidly, on your own personal trajectory.

It's also likely, if you're spending most of the day speaking a foreign language, that you will find yourself getting pretty tired for quite some time, although this does usually wear off eventually. As you learn the language, you'll probably make a fair few mistakes, too, both linguistically and culturally, and at times, this can feel both undermining and infantalising. You might be treated as if you're not as bright as you actually are, or as if you're a good deal younger. You might even sound like a child in the foreign language you're learning, as you grapple with grammar and pronunciation, vocabulary and tenses. Being treated like a child can be irritating, and something we often want to avoid, but it's also an opportunity to learn, so it's important to be willing to make mistakes, to get things wrong, and to pick yourself up and dust yourself down, and just try again if you don't get things right first time. It's seldom the end of the world if, from time to time, you use the wrong word, get your grammar mixed up, or make a bit of a cultural faux pas. These situations can sometimes be the ones in which we learn the most, and the ability to apologise if you've inadvertently caused offence and to explain with humility that you're a learner, is an important life skill that in any case, it's well worth acquiring.

Perhaps the hardest part of culture shock is not always realising when things might work very differently from the ways you're used to at home, and discovering that you might have got it wrong without even realising it. So depending on the situation - but particularly if you're really struggling to understand a particular way of doing things, an attitude, or a set of values - it might be worth finding a trusted member of the culture you're visiting, in order to get help not only with linguistic translation, where necessary, but also with what we might call 'cultural translation'. It's helpful if this is someone who understands something about your own language and culture, as they might well have experienced this situation themselves while learning your language and culture. Sometimes, just spending a period of time each day quietly observing or reflecting on whatever behaviour or concept it is that you're trying to understand can also be really helpful. The key thing is to endeavour to keep an open mind and to remain curious, and eventually, as you gradually adjust, you might find not only that you become more fluent in the language you're learning, but also more competent culturally. You might even start dreaming in the foreign language, or at the very least, dreaming about various places and people in your new culture of residence. Whilst not everyone experiences this or indeed likes it if they do, this can be a particularly important milestone in the cultural adjustment process.

Initially, feeling more stressed and anxious than usual is likely to be a normal part of your overseas experience but if, after a few weeks, you feel at all concerned about how you're getting on, do reach out to local medical or other support services, or contact your College Welfare Team, Tutors, or Department, to ask their advice. You can also get in touch with the University Counselling Service for a check-in, to help you think about any difficulties you're experiencing and your support needs while you're away. In the meantime, though, do listen to the third and final podcast in this series, to find out more about what you can do practically to prepare for your time abroad.