

# Module 3

## Cross-Cultural Communication

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## Key Terms and Concepts

- culture
- culture shock
- adaptation
- stereotyping
- cross-cultural communication
- reverse culture shock

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## Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you should be able to

1. create strategies to improve day-to-day cross-cultural communication and maximize cultural sensitivity.
2. explore stages of adaptation and personal strategies for managing the stress of culture shock.
3. avoid misunderstanding based on cultural differences and methods for managing relationships.
4. understand the country context and its impact on professional and personal objectives.

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## Introduction

Congratulations—you are about to embark on an experience of a lifetime! The opportunity to travel and work overseas is one of the greatest privileges we can enjoy. By going overseas, you will be able to immerse yourself in a foreign culture, speak the language of the people, learn their ways, and see the world through different eyes. You will have the kind of experience that will not only challenge you, but will stay with you through the rest of your life.

This Cross-Cultural Communication module will give you a general overview of the issues newcomers may face when they live in a foreign country: cultural self-awareness, cross-cultural communication, stereotypes, and values. This module is intended to help prepare you for your overseas placement through a combination of useful information and thought-provoking exercises. Being

prepared for new working and living contexts can make it easier to adjust, minimize stress, and increase cross-cultural effectiveness on both personal and professional levels.

It's not possible to talk about culture without making generalizations. Cultural generalizations are statements of likelihood and potential. At best, a generalization can tell you how people from a particular culture may behave in a given situation—not how they will behave or how they will always behave. Cultural generalizations can be helpful in the process of learning to understand other cultures, but be ready to set them aside when it is clear they have no meaning. Generalizations become dangerous when they result in negative stereotyping.

## 1. What Is Culture?

For the purpose of this module, here is the way to think about culture:

Culture is a people's way of life, their design for living, their way of coping with their biological, physical and social environment. It consists of learned, patterned assumptions (worldview), concepts and behavior, plus the resulting artifacts (material goods).

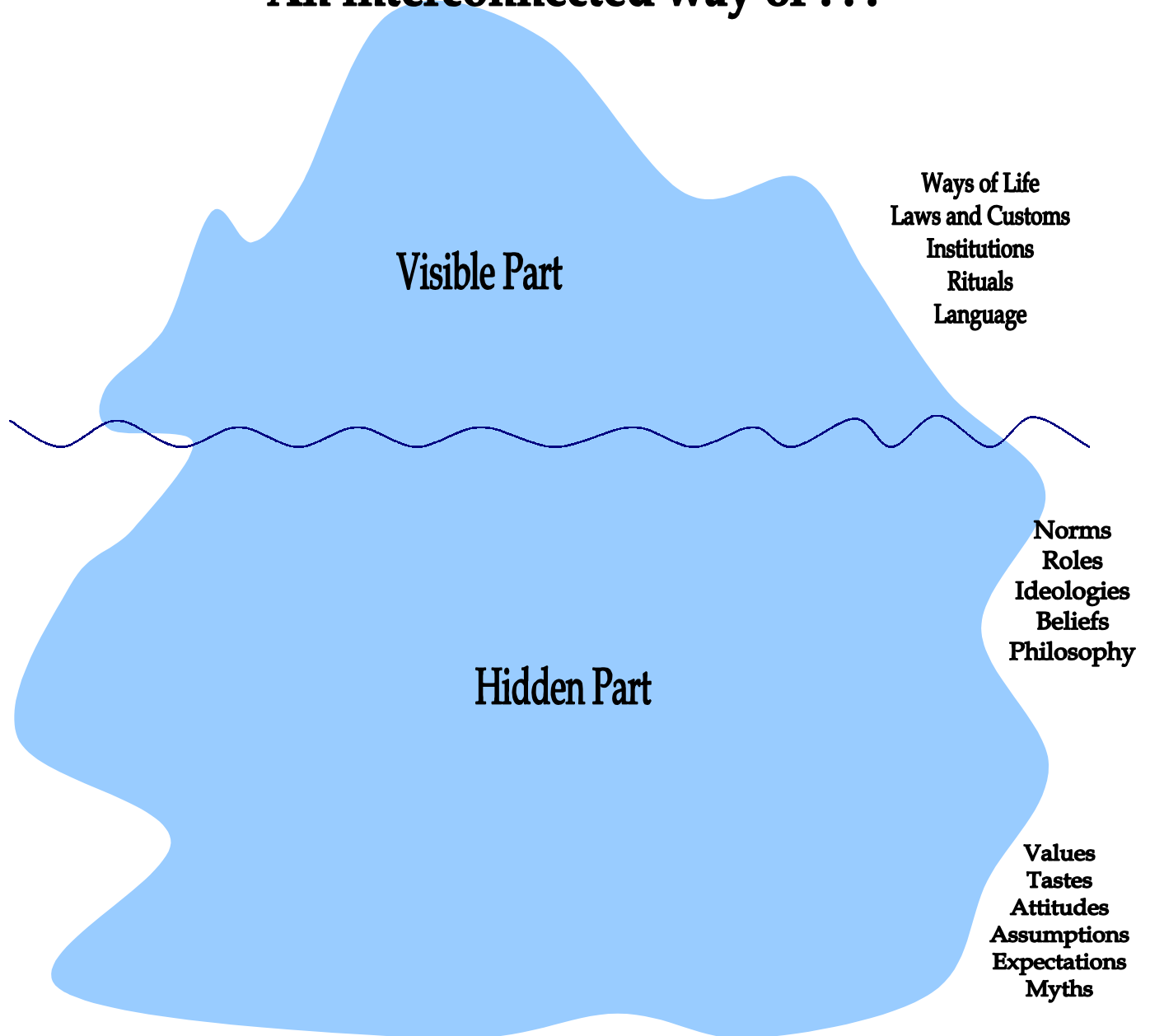
— Charles H. Kraft

A major component of a culture is its systems of values, beliefs, and material products. First, culture includes belief systems that involve stories, or myths, the interpretation of which can give people insight into how they should feel, think, and/or behave. The most prominent systems of beliefs tend to be those associated with formal religions; however, any system of belief in which the interpretation of stories affects people's behaviour—a system of superstitions, for example—can contribute to a component of a given society's culture. Second, culture includes value systems. Values are formed based on how we learned to think things ought to be or how people ought to behave, especially in terms of qualities such as honesty, integrity, and openness. Third, culture is also defined by material products such as food, clothing, and music.

Culture is often compared to an iceberg: you can see only a small portion of it, as most of it is hidden beneath the surface. The tip of the iceberg represents the visible aspects of culture, such as behaviour, music, literature, and dress. In this analogy, the remaining huge chunk of ice beneath the surface represents the invisible dimensions of culture, which include assumptions, values, and beliefs. Venturing into different cultures without adequate preparation can be just as dangerous as manoeuvring a ship through icy waters without charts, hoping to be lucky enough to avoid sharing the same fate as the Titanic!

# CULTURE

## An interconnected way of . . .



**. . . sharing with others that gives a sense of belonging.**

Source: Adapted from "Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook" (Washington, DC, 1996);  
as cited by the Centre for Intercultural Learning, Canadian Foreign Service Institute.

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## Exercise One

Place each of the following terms in one of the two categories in the table below, as appropriate.

- Facial expressions
- Literature
- Ideas about leadership
- Ideas about modesty
- Understanding the natural world
- Importance of time
- Styles of dress
- Rules of etiquette
- Gender roles
- Holiday customs
- Religious beliefs
- Values
- Eating habits
- Music
- Modes of transportation
- Folklore
- Stereotypes
- Gestures
- Paintings
- Democracy
- Ideas about fairness
- Foods
- Concept of self
- Concept of beauty
- General world view
- Housing
- Decision making
- Religious rituals
- Ideas about friendship
- The importance of work
- Concept of personal space
- Measures of success
- Slang
- Celebrations

Visible	Hidden

By examining hidden culture (i.e., people's values and beliefs systems) you will have a better understanding of people's behaviours and what to make of them. Not all of us interpret things the same way. For example, in North America one might say to a colleague or acquaintance, "We should plan on getting together for a drink next week." Often this invitation is not followed through in the following week, and the plan is postponed to the next month. While this behaviour is considered acceptable in many North American circles, it is perceived by Danes to be fickle, since Danes typically only make commitments to social engagements if they intend to follow through as presented. Be aware that your behaviours may not be interpreted in another country in the same way as they would be in your home country.

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## Self-Reflection

For each of the following behaviours, write down your interpretation of the behaviours in terms of your own cultural values, beliefs, or perceptions:

1. A person comes late to a meeting.
2. Someone makes the "okay" hand gesture at you (holding their hand up, palm facing you, with their thumb and forefinger forming a circle and the last three fingers held straight up).
3. Someone kicks a dog.
4. Someone in a store says he or she wants to purchase a pair of pants.

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In North America the "okay" gesture is used as a way of saying things are going well, while in many other cultures it can be considered rude or obscene. In England the word *pants* means "underwear." People in England use the word *trousers* for what in North America is known as "pants." Local understandings like these make aspects of living in another culture tricky. An innocent remark or a gesture on your part can result in a breakdown in communication. It is easy to know about the material products of a particular country (e.g., food, music, clothing), but it is more difficult to figure out what the values and beliefs are, as those are hidden beneath the surface of the culture.

People from the same culture often share a similar background, which leads to like perceptions, interpretations, and values. Culture can be universal—that is, there are ways in which people in all groups are the same—and it can be personal—that is, there are ways in which each one of us is different from

everyone else. You will find some things in your host country’s culture to be similar to yours, while other things will be different. Sometimes, these differences are very subtle. It is your job while overseas to figure out what those differences are.

## 2. Exploring Your Own Culture

One’s own culture provides the “lens” through which we view the world; the “logic” . . . by which we order it; the “grammar” . . . by which it makes sense.

—Avruch and Black

Cross-cultural understanding also requires knowing one’s own culture as the essential starting point. It is important to know your own cultural constitution and how it can affect your choices, attitudes, and communication while you are overseas. The next exercise will help you to explore your own cultural makeup.

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### Exercise Two

Write your answers to the following questions, giving a response of 3–5 pages in length (in total). Post your response in the discussion page of WebCT.

1. How do you define your national identity? What values, beliefs, customs, and so on, make up your national identity?
2. If you were new to your own country and had only the print medium to learn from, what would you list as the country’s values and/or priorities?
3. How do you perceive your geographic region to be unique in terms of
  - language, including accent, idioms, jargon, slang?
  - social persona—openness to newcomers, friendliness, extroversion?
  - economic status/prestige?
  - cultural values and priorities (festivals, music, food, sport, landscape)?
  - concepts of time and personal space?
4. How do you think others perceive your geographic region?

If you are from Canada, for example, you might first be perceived as a Canadian even if you are originally from another country. You will be considered to be knowledgeable about Canada because you live in Canada. The people you meet overseas will have stereotypes about you, learned from other Canadians or Westerners they have met, or possibly from Hollywood movies. As well, many of the people you meet will be interested in finding out more about Canada. Keep in mind that you are an ambassador for your country and the sending institution. Your actions may be seen as representative of all people in your country. Look at your experience abroad as an opportunity for two cultures to learn about each other.

### 3. Exploring Your Host Culture

It is important to learn as much about your host culture as possible before going abroad. This will help you prepare for your internship and hopefully reduce the number of “cultural faux pas” you unconsciously commit upon arrival.

In the Course Content page of WebCT, you will find four Arctic country case studies. In addition to providing general information about your host country, there are cultural insights provided by former interns. Read the case study of your host country, and then complete the following exercise.

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#### Exercise Three

1. How does the culture of your host country compare to your own culture?
  2. What aspects are the most different?
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### 4. Communication Styles

Communication is about sending and receiving messages. On a daily basis we communicate with people in every sphere of our lives—at home, at work, and in various manifestations within our community. Our messages are open to interpretation, and often we experience communication challenges. Just when we think we are communicating well, we realize that someone has not understood what we were trying to say.<sup>1</sup>

Our culture has a role in presenting us with those challenges: it has helped shape the way in which we approach problems, how we participate in groups, and how

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<sup>1</sup> Marcelle E. DuPrav and Marya Axner, *Working on Common Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges* (A More Perfect Union).



we interact with people in our communities. In groups, we often notice how differently people approach their work together<sup>2</sup> and what happens, for example, when one person interprets a remark differently than the rest of the people in the group.

Words and behaviours denote different things in different cultures, and even within a culture. The following is an examination of the way people communicate—that is, their communication styles. Note that although a culture doesn't use one particular communication style to the exclusion of all others, most cultures tend to use one more than another.

### **Direct v. Indirect**

Some cultures have very direct/low-context forms of communication. People from direct/low-context cultures are more individualistic than people from indirect cultures; they lead more independent lives and share fewer experiences. They say what they mean and mean what they say. You do not have to read between the lines to figure out what they mean: to them, the truth is more important than sparing someone's feelings.

Other cultures have more indirect/high-context forms of communication. These cultures are more collectivistic, where saving face is important. People imply or suggest what they mean instead of stating it bluntly and directly. In high-context cultures, messages often do not need words to be expressed; people use body language and other forms of communication. This can make it difficult for outsiders to understand, as one has to infer meaning from words or from non-verbal cues and behaviours. People living in indirect/high-context cultures tend to avoid confrontation.

### **Linear v. Circular**

In a linear communication style, one is straightforward and has a low reliance on context and a strong reliance on words. In a circular communication style, there is a high reliance on context: discussion involves telling stories and otherwise developing a context around the main point.

### **Attached v. Detached**

In an attached communication style, issues are presented with feeling and emotions; the person expresses how he or she feels about a situation. In a detached communication style, issues are discussed in a calm and objective way; people are less likely to get emotionally aroused in a discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> DuPraw and Axner.

## Concrete v. Abstract

People who use a concrete style of communication prefer to communicate using stories, metaphors, and examples, while people who use abstract communication understand issues best through the use of principles and data, and they prefer to emphasize the general rather than the specific.

Which style of communication, or combination of styles, do you use?

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## Self-Reflection

Your supervisor comes from a culture in which people do not shy away from confrontation. After two months, you are used to your supervisor's straightforward manner of addressing issues. She wants to tell you your personal work schedule is too relaxed (coming in late; taking lunch at the wrong time, etc.), but she is heading out of town and has asked your secondary supervisor to let you know the correct office protocol. Your secondary supervisor comes from a culture in which people do not confront people directly.

How might your secondary supervisor communicate the message? How might it be different from how your supervisor would communicate the message?

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## 5. Other Aspects of Communication Style

### Language Usage

One aspect of communication style is the customary or established use of words. As you read in the "What Is Culture?" section of this module, from one culture to the next some words and phrases are used to mean different things.

For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of "yes" [depending on the speaker's tone of voice and body language] varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with many shades in-between.<sup>3</sup>

### Non-Verbal Communication

Communication can be non-verbal. Gestures, posture, silence, emotional expressions, touch, and physical appearance are examples of non-verbal cues. One culture might attribute a higher importance to non-verbal behaviour, or

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<sup>3</sup> DuPraw and Axner.

cues, than would another culture with a different communication style. Still, when we interact with other people, non-verbal cues can bear important information. The concept of personal space, for example, can be understood through non-verbal communication. In some parts of the world, people are accustomed to smaller personal spaces and tend to stand or sit close to each other when they are talking. If such a person is talking to someone who prefers more personal space, the person talking may notice his or her companion take a step or two away. A social difficulty can arise if either person misunderstands their companion's culture. The person talking may see the other person's attempt to create more space as dislike or a lack of interest. The person accustomed to more personal space may view attempts to get close as pushy or disrespectful.

## **Dealing with Conflict**

Another aspect of communication is how we deal with conflict. DuPraw and Axner explain it well:

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In [North America], conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In . . . [other] countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule [for travellers], differences are best worked out quietly. . . . Keep this in mind when you are in a dialogue or when you are working with others.<sup>4</sup>

Another thing to remember when you find yourself in a conflict with someone is that some people may not feel comfortable dealing directly with you. Asking them questions about why they have an issue regarding you or your work may seem intrusive and put them in an uncomfortable situation.

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## **Discussion**

What are some things you can do to ensure that the message you send and the message received are the same? Post your response on the WebCT Discussion Board.

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DuPraw and Axner have words to remember:

Next time you find yourself in a confusing situation, and you suspect that cross-cultural differences are at play, . . . [a]sk yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions, and try to see the world from others' points of view.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> DuPraw and Axner.

<sup>5</sup> DuPraw and Axner.

## 6. Culture Shock

The term *culture shock* was first introduced in the 1950s by Kalvero Oberg to describe the phenomena people might experience after moving to a new environment. Culture shock can be described as the feeling of disorientation experienced by a person suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture or way of life. Culture shock is difficult to identify. It does not appear suddenly; rather, it builds up slowly and is often a series of small events. For some people, culture shock can be brief and hardly noticeable. For others, it can bring intense physical and emotional discomfort.

Why do people experience culture shock? It could be attributed to communication barriers, moving out of a comfort zone, immobility (tighter control over movement), unrealistic expectations, a sense of time and pace of life, perceptions of culturally inappropriate behaviours, frustrations over lack of results, and so on.

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### Exercise Four

Write your signature on a piece of paper, first with your usual, dominant hand and then with your weaker hand. Then answer the following questions.

1. How did you feel while you wrote your signature with your usual hand?
2. How did you feel while you performed this task with your weaker hand?
3. What happens when we are faced daily with unusual tasks and demands?

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No matter how prepared you are, or how open-minded, or how much you have travelled in the past, you can still experience culture shock. Culture shock is normal, and it does not last forever!

Many people who experience culture shock are unaware what it is, or they attribute their symptoms to something else. Culture shock has a wide range of symptoms, and being able to identify the symptoms as culture shock can help make adjusting to overseas living easier. Culture shock may involve any of these symptoms:

- sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- preoccupation with health
- insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little

- depression, feeling vulnerable, feeling powerless, changes in temperament
- anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others
- identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- loss of identity
- trying too hard to absorb everything in the new culture or country
- unable to solve simple problems
- lack of confidence
- feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- excessive drinking
- developing stereotypes about the new culture
- developing obsessions, such as over-cleanliness
- longing for family
- feeling lost, overlooked, exploited, or abused
- a desire to go home, to partake of comfort food, to visit one's relatives, to talk to people with whom it is easy to communicate

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## Self-Reflection

Reflect on a time when you previously experienced a form of culture shock. Are you having difficulty remembering one? What about the first time you changed schools? Your first year at university? Have you ever moved to another city? When was the last time you felt like an “outsider”?

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As a result of many studies on culture shock, four stages have been identified.

**First stage.** Known as the “honeymoon stage,” you first arrive to your destination and in spite of loss of sleep from travelling, issues with transportation, and some language difficulties, everything seems great and new. The sites are interesting, the local people are helpful, and the food is tasty. This produces a feeling of euphoria: a desire to look around, experiment, and explore. This stage is normally brief, but it can last up to a month or more.  
**Symptoms:** enthusiastic, positive attitude, excited, fascinated, energetic.

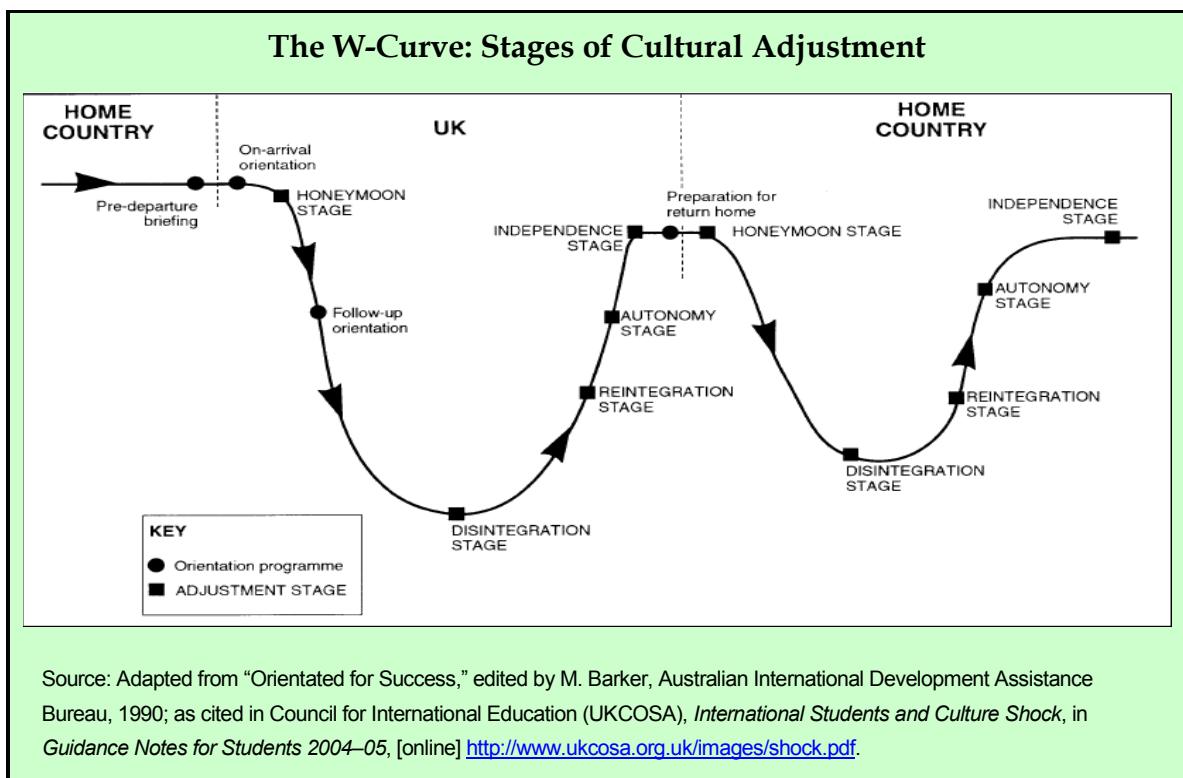
**Second stage.** Culture shock sets in. The novelty starts to wear off and one begins to criticize the country, the life, and the values of the people. At this stage, you begin to look for compatriots to discuss your symptoms and to criticize the country and people. You begin to be negative and start to speak of

the people in the third person, using phrases such as “these people.” This is the critical stage of culture shock. This can last for a few days, weeks, or months. **Symptoms:** depressed, frustrated, confused, angry, sick, and critical of the host culture.

**Third stage.** Known as the “recovery stage,” you begin to understand some of the cultural cues and more of the language, and you start to feel less isolated. Your understanding of the local culture deepens. You begin to reflect on the past couple of weeks and laugh at your own mistakes. **Symptoms:** accepts the host culture, less judgmental, sense of humour returns, energy is back.

**Fourth stage.** This is the “adjustment stage,” where you begin to feel at home and enjoy living in the foreign country. You may not like all of the customs of the country, but you can live with them. **Symptoms:** motivated, accepting things you cannot change, adapting and assimilating to the changes, and starting to explore, once again.

Can culture shock be avoided? Probably not, but it can be minimized. See the following illustration of the stages of cultural adjustment.



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## Exercise Five

Submit your written answers to the following questions to your instructor.

1. Referring to the previous self-reflection, how did you deal with culture shock in that situation?
  2. What other ways can you deal with culture shock?
  3. How do you plan to get through culture shock while you are on your internship?
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## 7. Cultural Adaptation and Awareness

As one goes through the cycle of adjustment in a new culture, one's understanding and knowledge of the host country increases. This awareness tends to progress through the stages as described in Box 2.1.

### Box 2.1 Adjustment Stages

**Unconscious incompetence.** At this stage, you are unaware of culture differences. It does not occur to you that you may be making mistakes or that you might be misinterpreting much of the behavior going on around you.

**Conscious incompetence.** You now realize there are differences between how you and local people behave, though you understand very little about these differences, how numerous they might be, etc.

**Conscious competence.** You know cultural differences exist, you know what some of those differences are, and you adjust your behavior accordingly. You have to make a conscious effort to behave in culturally appropriate ways.

**Unconscious competence.** You no longer have to think about what you're doing in order to do the right thing. It takes little effort for you to be culturally sensitive.

Source: Centre for Intercultural Learning, Canadian Foreign Service Institute. Based on work of William Howell; adapted from Peace Corps (1996), "Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook" (Washington, DC: The Peace Corps).

Adapting to a culture requires patience, flexibility, and cultural understanding. Remember, just because you adapt to your host country doesn't mean you become a person of that nationality. It does mean, however, that you are able to understand another culture and make an impact. Successful cultural adaptation will ensure that you'll benefit from the rewards of your experience abroad for years to come.

The following are a few helpful strategies for adapting to your host country. Can you think of others?

1. Learn the language. Even if you can't speak perfectly, your attempts to communicate in the native language will be appreciated.
2. Become involved in the culture. Show your willingness to learn about the people and culture by participating in the daily life of your community. Seek out opportunities to share yourself and your background with your hosts whenever possible.
3. Be honest—if you don't understand something, seek clarification.

To succeed overseas  
you must be able  
to work effectively across cultures.

In Box 2.2, you will find a profile of the interculturally effective person. This is not an exhaustive list, but it includes the main skills and traits an interculturally effective person possesses. Take a look at this inventory and identify your areas of strengths and weaknesses. Don't despair if you find you don't have some of these attributes. As you are about to depart on your placement, keep in mind that you will develop and/or enhance many of these qualities as a result of your overseas experience.



### **Box 2.2 A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person**

**1. Adaptation Skills.** Interculturally Effective Persons (IEPs) have the ability to cope personally, professionally, and in their family context with the conditions and challenges of living and working in another culture.

**2. An Attitude of Modesty and Respect.** IEPs demonstrate modesty about their own culture's answers to problems and a respect for the ways of the local culture, are humble about their knowledge of the local context, and are therefore willing to learn much and consult with locals before coming to conclusions on issues.

**3. An Understanding of the Concept of Culture.** IEPs have an understanding of the concept of culture and the pervasive influence it will have on their life and work abroad.

**4. Knowledge of the Host Country and Culture.** IEPs possess knowledge of the host country and culture and try constantly to expand that knowledge.

**5. Relationship Building.** IEPs possess good relationship-building skills, both social/personal and professional.

**6. Self-Knowledge.** Knowledge of one's own background, motivations, strengths and weaknesses.

**7. Intercultural Communication.** IEPs are effective intercultural communicators.

**8. Organizational Skills.** IEPs strive to improve the quality of organizational structures, processes, and staff morale, and promote a positive atmosphere in the workplace.

**9. Personal and Professional Commitment.** IEPs have a high level of personal and professional commitment to the assignment and the life experience in another culture.

Source: Thomas Vulpe et al. (2000), *A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person* (Gatineau, Quebec: Centre for Intercultural Learning, Canadian Foreign Service Institute).

## 8. Reverse Culture Shock

Returning home can also be difficult. Leaving your host country, new friends, new home, and a new culture you've become accustomed to makes returning home more complicated than just stepping on the plane.

Simply put, reverse culture shock refers to feeling out of sorts in your own country. Some people say it is more difficult returning home than it is going abroad.

Why might you experience reverse culture shock? There are many reasons. Your values may have changed; you can see the flaws of your home country in a way you couldn't before; your relationships with people close to you have changed; you have left a part of yourself abroad; and no one understands what you experienced.

Recognize that you may need some time to readjust. Re-entry is a time of transition. Learn ways to take care of yourself during this period and ease into your surroundings. Although it is good to have an understanding of reverse culture shock before going abroad, you'll have a chance to take part in a discussion about it in more detail during the debriefing.

## Resources

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*Culture.ca: Canada's Cultural Gateway*. [Website] <http://www.culture.ca/canada/>. This website aims to engage Canadians in cultural life, to educate and entertain Web surfers with the stories of many peoples, and to provide online access to the best of Canadian culture.

*Culture Shock: A Fish Out of Water*. [Website] <http://www.international.ouc.bc.ca/cultureshock/>. This is an interactive site on culture shock (describes stages, symptoms, etc.).

Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Government of Canada. [Online] <http://www.fac-aec.gc.ca>. This website provides an overview of Canada's perspective on foreign policy issues.

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Hill, Richard. 2002. *We Europeans*. Brussels, Belgium: Europublic SA/NV. [Online] <http://www.europublic.com>. This book provides a penetrating and entertaining analysis of the attitudes and behavioural traits of each European nationality.

Intermundo: The Culture Network. [Website] <http://www.intermundo.net>. This website is an online network for those interested in intercultural issues (articles, discussion board, resources, etc.). Membership is free. John's ESL Community. *Culture Shock Quiz*. [Online] <http://www.johnsesl.com/Projects/CultureShockQuiz.shtml>. Test your knowledge of culture chock by taking this online quiz.

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PREPAREculture\\_shock.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~uiabroad/predeparture/PREPAREculture_shock.html). This is an article on culture shock and how  
to minimize it.

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