



SpartansAbroad

Culture and Cultural Adjustment

What is Culture?

Culture refers to the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.

In society, culture...

- Influences our expectations of what is appropriate or inappropriate
- Reflects the values of a society
- Frames our experiences
- Provides us with patterns of behavior, thinking, feeling, and interacting
- Is learned through socialization
- Affects every aspect of daily life



Understanding Culture: The Iceberg Model

The Iceberg Model helps to illustrate the complexities of culture using two categories: surface culture and deep culture.

These distinctions suggest that only 10% of culture can be seen, whereas 90% is outside of our conscious awareness. Most cultural traditions feed from deep culture, not surface culture.

This can make it difficult for you to understand the cultural environment of your host country.



Culture: Asking Yourself the Right Questions

Interacting in a new culture can be challenging. There is not one correct way to approach new cultural interactions. One way to prepare is to do some self-reflection:

For example, consider asking yourself:

- What historical events may have influenced the way of life in my host culture?
- Could this interaction be perceived differently than how I originally interpreted it?
- Why might you find a situation frustrating when locals are perfectly at ease? Are you missing something?

Adjusting to a new culture requires patience, humility and critical reflection. With practice and a genuine interest to understand, you will make great strides in understanding your new environment.



Language

While most MSU programs do not require you to take a foreign language while abroad, learning a bit before you leave can make your experience much more exciting. After all, language is a major component of culture.

- Consider learning a few [useful key phrases](#) for each country you plan to visit.
- There are many free apps you can download to help you learn language basics or assist you in navigating through your new country. A few popular options include Babbel or [DuoLingo](#).
- MSU Libraries also has free language resources such as [Mango Languages](#) to learn situational basics.
- Even if you're going to an English-speaking country or you speak your host country's language, be prepared that you may experience varying regional dialects and unfamiliar vocabulary. Consider researching common regional words before you leave.





Viewing the world through your cultural lens

When you enter a new culture, it is understandable to evaluate experiences from your frame of reference (your cultural lens) without even realizing it. This is because culture is learned through socialization. Being aware of this invisible lens will help you experience the environment around you in a less critical or ethnocentric way.

Before you depart for your program, think about what makes up your American cultural lens? How would you describe a typical American?

You will find that in many other places in the world, perceptions of the United States vary. For example:

- You may experience extreme reactions when you say you are from the USA. These may be positive, negative, or mixed.
- You will likely find that some stereotypes are exacerbated by current events
- The global perception of Americans is also heavily influenced by American pop culture. Your fellow students may be surprised to hear you do not live like the celebrities they see in the media.



Typical Perceptions of Americans Abroad:

- Loud and Obnoxious
- Overly Friendly
- Constantly smiling
- Ignorant of other cultures
- Monolingual (English only)
- Heavy Drinkers and Partiers
- Uninformed about global events

Some helpful links:

- [wikiHow To Avoid Looking like an American](#)

Combating the “American Abroad” Stereotype

The best way to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes is by being aware of what those stereotypes are and adjusting your behavior accordingly.

While abroad you should be prepared to:

- Answer questions about your opinion on current political affairs
 - Educate yourself about American politics and involvement in your host country. Be ready to answer or respectfully excuse yourself from tricky political questions.
- Serve as a representative of Michigan State University and the USA.
 - Keep in mind that for some, you may be the only American they have ever met.
- Blend in with your host country as best you can
 - Consider avoiding ‘American clothing’. This includes items with the American flag or excessive wording on them.
- Embrace your new surroundings
 - Do not expect everything to be like home. Appreciate the location you have chosen for what it is.



Introduction to Cultural Perceptions



“The challenge of working across borders is that we’ve got different ideas of accepted and familiar.”

Pellegrino Riccardi, TEDxBergen



Research Your Destination

Prior to your departure we urge you to take some time to research your host destination and stay informed about developments in the country/countries where you will spend time. This will help you acclimate to your new environment and gain a deeper appreciation for the people, places and things you may see along the way.

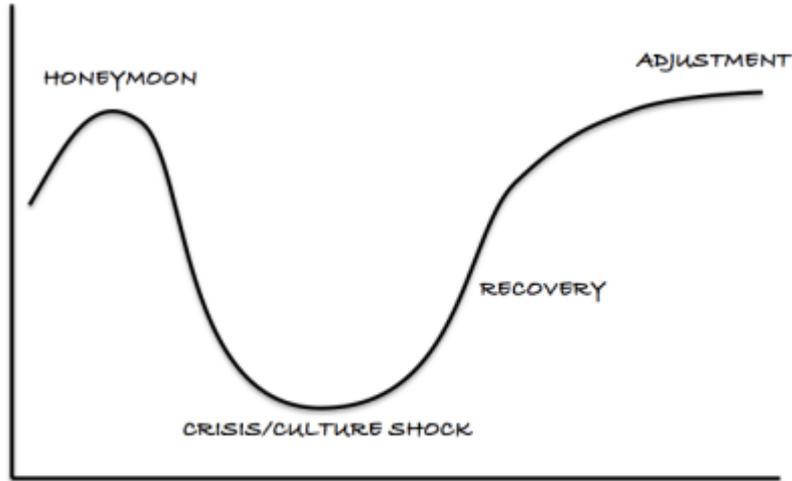
To get you started, here are a few links we think you will find helpful:

- [U.S. Department of State](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [The International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association](#)
- [MSU Global Edge](#)
- **International SOS:** Use the MSU membership number (11BCAS798617) to sign in and research your destination. If you have specific questions, call the 24/7 Assistance Scholastic line: +1-215-942-8478.

Contact the Office of International Health and Safety if you have any questions or concerns about health, safety, or security issues at your destination.

- www.oihis.isp.msu.edu
- oihs@msu.edu
- 517-884-2174 or 517-884-9419

Culture Shock: The Adjustment Curve



It may help to understand culture shock as a progression of adjusting to your new environment. Often, the transition comes in phases.

Similar to the learning zones principle, these stages can come and go in waves. Not every student will experience every phase, nor will the phases occur only once or for equal amounts of time. The graph is a rough model, but the reality is not a smooth progression from one phase to the next.

It is important to take stock of your emotions and recognize when you may be experiencing culture shock.

Phase 1: Honeymoon Phase

- Everything is new and exciting
- You tend to focus on the surface aspects of the culture
- Similarities tend to stand out

Phase 2: Crisis/ Culture Shock

- Focus shifts from similarities to differences
- Often causes confusion, frustration, irritation, and hostility - small issues are often blown out of proportion

Phase 3: Recovery

- Positive perceptions begin to return
- An interest to learn about the environment continues

Phase 4: Adaptation/ Adjustment

- You are now able to draw on local resources to go about your daily life

Culture Shock: Recognition

Causes of Culture Shock:

- Not knowing how to read the cultural cues around you
- Having unrealistic expectations
- Having your own values brought into question
- Living in an environment where you do not always know the cultural expectation

Symptoms of Culture Shock:

- Compulsive eating
- Excessive crying
- Irritability
- Nationalistic behavior
- Hostility towards locals
- Excessive sleep
- Boredom
- Ineffective academic performance
- Homesickness
- Social Withdrawal



Combating Symptoms of Culture Shock

Some simple strategies can help you work through culture shock, and thrive more quickly in a new environment.

Connection & Activity - Establishing connections with locals early who can help you acclimate to the new culture. Doing activities you enjoy at home, and just getting out in general, will help you make connections and feel better all around.

Self-regulation & Awareness - Understand how you express distress and how you can convey this to others. Consider how your actions are impacting others

Optimism - Challenge unhelpful thinking by reframing it in a positive way. This will improve your mood and help identify what is and is not within your control.

Flexible thinking - Try removing your personal feelings from the situation. This allows you to have a balanced perspective on the situation and many an objective decisions.



Considerations for your Experience Abroad

DO:

- Set realistic academic and personal goals before you go abroad and re-assess them regularly
- Step outside of your comfort zone in order to learn the local language.
- Expect to feel frustrated, angry, or down sometimes.
- Talk to others about how you are feeling.
- Talk to your program advisor or an MSU staff member if you are having a serious problem.

Do NOT:

- View the overseas experience as an extended vacation.
- Expect to see profound changes overnight-- including learning a new language.
- Put yourself in an unsafe situation.
- Hide away in your room or sleep all day.
- Let frustration and anger consume your experience.
- Think you're the only one having difficulties.
- Give up!

Remember:

It's ok to feel homesick or out of place!

Your sense of comfort and security is removed entering into a new environment. You may miss your family, friends, and familiar things from home like your surroundings and everyday routine.



“Most of us are not aware we have a culture until we step outside of it.”

Jacob Dick, Maximizing Study Abroad

Interacting With Your Host Culture

Depending on your program type and duration, opportunities to interact with locals in your host culture will vary.

Particularly for short-term and highly structured programs, students have a tendency to form tight groups consisting entirely of fellow home country students. For long-term programs and programs with more autonomy, it is not uncommon to struggle with anxiety about meeting and talking to new people.

Understanding some common barriers to intercultural communication will help you have more successful interactions while abroad. Push yourself out of your comfort zone regardless of your program type and duration. Doing so can lead to lifelong friendships and relationships.

Bringing it Home: Developing Cultural Competence

Intercultural Communication Competence is one's ability to execute effective and appropriate communication behaviors in order to achieve communication goals in an intercultural context. Many intercultural communication scholars will tell you that having cultural competence boils down to three things:

Intercultural Sensitivity - our ability to cope with culture shock, personal feelings about the situation we are in, how we manage stressful situations and managing feelings of alienation or uncertainty.

Intercultural Awareness - a keen recognition of the social values, customs and norms we bring with us when we enter a new culture. It also includes our personal self-concept, level of self-awareness and our willingness for self-disclosure as part of the learning process.

Intercultural Behavior and Skill - our communication skills, (both verbal and non-verbal), our empathy towards those that are different from us, our flexibility to adjust in unfamiliar situations and our ability to modify our interaction style align with our host culture.





Developing Cultural Competence

There are Five Orientations of Intercultural Development ranging from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural mindset. Consider where you may fall on the scale and how you might work towards further developing your intercultural competencies.

1. **Denial** - In this stage one might be disinterested in or even avoid intercultural interactions. They often hold many stereotypes and believe their sense of reality is correct.
2. **Polarization/Defense/Reversal** - This orientation creates a sense of 'us' vs. 'them' or viewing one culture as superior to another.
3. **Minimization** - Individuals at this stage are able to recognize some patterns of cultural difference, but tends to choose to look for commonalities, often through one's own cultural lens
4. **Acceptance** - At this stage, one can recognize cultural patterns and understands that cultural experiences need to be understood from perspectives of the other culture, not one's own.
5. **Adaptation** - The final stage gives the individual the capability to appreciate the differences between cultures and shift their behavior according to the cultural context they find themselves in. This involves taking on the perspective of the host culture and changing behaviour in culturally appropriate ways.

Cultural Competencies: The Journey

It is important to know the concepts contained in this presentation. Doing so will help you understand your starting point when you enter a new culture and deal with reactions you may be having on a subconscious and/or conscious level.

Developing your cultural competencies is a process. No one person can move through all 5 stages of competency development in one singular cultural experience. This is a life-skill that is intentionally developed and refined over time through many intercultural experiences.

It is okay to not be an expert on your host culture. It is also okay to not always know the right course of action when faced with a difficult intercultural interaction. Apply what you have learned from researching your host culture, and take this opportunity to learn from your host culture, both inside and outside of the classroom.

