

Experiences of a sojourner

Going abroad to live in a foreign country is always a big change in a person's life, and can be a stressful experience. It means living in an unfamiliar environment, a different culture far away from family and friends and often dealing with a foreign language.

Culture influences every aspect of human life. As Edward T. Hall states, *"there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture."* Culture is learned behaviours, norms, rules and ways of living and thinking. And it is always shared by a group of people. Members of this group act, think and live in similar ways. Therefore, while living in 'their' culture, people are unconscious about their cultural behaviour. Normally, every person thinks that the way he is behaving is normal, and takes for granted that everybody else will act the same way. Just when one has to deal with people from a different culture one will realise the existence of cultural differences, because people of other cultures behave, speak, and live differently from what they are used to.

When people from different cultures meet, this thinking can lead to frustration and misunderstanding, because the other person acts unexpectedly, or his behaviour cannot be understood. Every culture has its *"own identity, language, system of non-verbal communication, material culture, history, and ways of doing things"* says Hall.

The sojourner always has to keep *"...in mind that the other culture is a system that is organised as equally complex as our own culture, we cannot stick to a static vision of our own or the other culture. Instead 'culture is action' and we constantly re-create our worlds by collective action..."*. That is why he has to learn to understand the new culture, to accept cultural differences and to stop comparing the new culture with their native one. As revealed in their own surveys, the reason why many foreign students come to the UDLA is to get to know the Mexican culture, and to create a contact with the host nation.

High- and low-context cultures

Edward T. Hall defines two different types of culture: *"high- and low-context"* cultures. Both cultures have different time systems, monochronic time (M-time) and polychronic-time (P-time), which *"represent two variant solutions to the use of both time and space organising frames for activities."* High context cultures, Mexican, for example, use the polychronic time system, which is *"characterized by several things happening at once."* In this culture, plans for the future are not *"solid or firm"*, everything can change until the last minute and for members of this culture *"scheduling is difficult if not impossible"*. In a high context culture, the process is more important than the completion. As Hall says, *"polychronic cultures often place completion of a job in a special category much below the importance of being nice, courteous, considerate, kind, and sociable to other human beings."* *"People make greater distinctions between insiders and outsiders than low-context cultures do."* People in high-context cultures have an indirect way of saying things. For example, a person *"will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he does not have to be specific."*

Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Doubleday, Division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1989) 16.

Hall, 2.

Matthias Otten, *"Intercultural Learning and Diversity in Higher Education,"* Journal of Studies in International Education, (Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2003): 16.

Hall, 17–22, 53, 105–131, 150, 155–167.

Hall, 17.

Hall, 17.

Hall, 18.

Hall, 22.

Hall, 150.

Hall, 113.

Hall, 113.

Low context cultures, northern European or North American for example, function on a monochronic time system, in which “...they are serious, usually prefer to do one thing at a time”. They like to plan the future and prefer to know exactly what is going to happen. “M-time scheduling is used as a classification system that orders life. With the exception of birth and death, all important activities are scheduled.” M-time is learned, as Hall says, “Because it is so thoroughly learned and so thoroughly integrated into our culture, it is treated as though it were the only natural and “logical” way of organizing life.” In low-context cultures, completion is very important and not so much the process. “Directness, openness, and honesty are valued, as is freedom of emotional expression. Spontaneity and casualness characterize informal relationships.”

Hall, 17.

Hall, 19.

Hall, 20.

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<http://www.irc.uci.edu/trg/137.html>

If people from these two cultures meet, great difficulties can arise because of their differences. “To the low-context, monochronic, one-thing-at-a-time person, polychronic behavior can be almost totally disorganizing in its effect...Action chains get broken, and nothing is completed. The two systems are like oil and water: they do not mix.” states Hall.

Hall, 150.

For these reasons, it can be helpful if the sojourner gets prepared for the fact that he will encounter such difficulties. According to Hall, “Nothing could be more practical than being aware of the significance of cultural differences.” To live and interact with a foreign culture, the sojourner has to learn and understand the way it works. There are different ways that people prepare themselves for a sojourn. Big companies, for example, let their employees who will go abroad participate in intercultural workshops before their journey. In these they will be informed about the phenomenon of culture shock, the culture of the destination country, etc. In case of students going abroad, this preparation is mostly done by sending out information—printed or digital—while the student is still in his home country. Or it is done after his arrival through national mediators, who help them during their first few weeks, by explaining the new culture, accompanying them to arrange administrative paper work and by showing them around. All these different media help to smooth the process of adaptation to the new culture.

Hall, 164.

Adaptation to a new culture

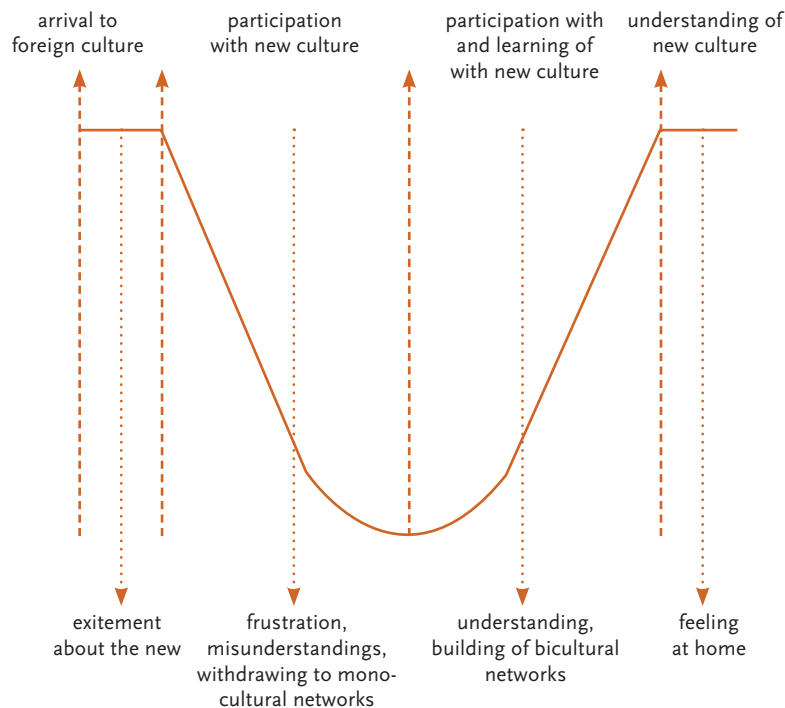
The process of adapting to a foreign culture is often described as being in the form of a U- or W-curve, because this process is repeated often when the student returns to his native culture. He gets very accustomed to the foreign culture, and has to relearn how to act within his native one.

During the first days abroad the sojourner is often very excited about the foreign culture, Oberg calls it the “Honeymoon stage”. “An initial reaction of enchantment, fascination, enthusiasm, admiration and cordial, friendly, superficial relationships with hosts.” At this stage his point of view is that of a visitor of this culture, he does not participate with it. He is looking on it from the outside and enjoys the differences to his own culture, the exotic food and different way of living. “When the sojourner’s role as an observer shifts to that of a participant, a transition that is inevitable, the initial fascination with the new culture similarly shifts to now having to cope with it, which in Bochner’s terms means learning its salient features.” At this stage, misunderstandings and frustration can arise because the

Stephen Bochner and Adrian Furnham, *Cultures Shock, Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989) 131.

Bochner and Furnham, 133.

sojourner does not understand the other people's behaviour, their language and way of living. He has to learn the new culture to be able to participate and to feel comfortable.



Graphic after C. A. A. Zwingmann and A. D. G. Gunn (1983) *Uprooting and health: psychosocial problems of students from abroad*, Geneva, World Health Organisation, Division of Mental Health in Bochner, Stephen and Furnham, Adrian, *Culture Shock*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 127.

Culture Shock

Students who go abroad “often tend to be highly skilled in the verbal and non-verbal practices of their own society...” And students who want to participate in exchange programs normally are required have a good grade average. At UDLA in order to be accepted for an exchange program an average of at least 8.5 is needed.

In their own culture these students know exactly how to act, to talk and to behave, “and find their sudden inadequacy in the new culture to be quite frustrating, not having had many similar experiences of failure previously.” Not understanding the host nation's behaviour and not knowing how to react is not only frustrating but can cause insecurity and a withdrawing from the host nation. A lack of knowledge of the foreign language makes it all the more difficult. “There is the ever present possibility that they may suddenly find themselves in situations where they cannot make themselves understood, where, for want of being able to express their needs, those needs must go unmet.” That is, what a lot of students reported in the questionnaire: These experiences “can be deeply troubling to the average expatriate, giving rise to feelings of profound vulnerability.”

This phenomenon is also called ‘culture shock’. Michael Argyle describes it in “Cultures in Contact” as, “a state of acute anxiety produced by an unfamiliar environment, unfamiliar social norms and behaviour and social signals, confusion of values or identity and a feeling of incompetence at dealing with the environment.” Culture shock can cause the sojourner to withdraw from the new culture and

Bochner and Furnham, 15.

Bochner and Furnham, 201.

Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Culture* (Yarmouth/USA: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1990), 87.

Stephen Bochner, (Editor), *Cultures in Contact, Studies in cross-cultural interaction* (Pergamon Press, 1982), 62.

can lead to an early return to his home country. But as Craig Storti says, “*Stress and anxiety ... are conditions the normal, healthy person tries to avoid, whether at home or abroad. It’s only natural, therefore, that if we find our encounters with the local culture stressful and otherwise unpleasant, we will begin to pull back from it. And by withdrawing and isolating ourselves from the culture, we seriously undermine any possibility of meaningful adjustment; we can hardly adjust to that which we decline to experience.*”

Storti, 28.

Therefore it is very important to minimise comparisons of new and native culture and complaints about cultural differences. The sojourner has to try to adjust or at least accept different cultural behaviour. As Storti says, “*We are the ones, after all, who have gone abroad; as guests we can’t very well demand that our hosts adjust to us.*” But to help the foreigner in this process he needs explanations and – most importantly – additional contact with the host nation that goes beyond his own efforts. But as mentioned above, a lot of foreigners withdraw from the host population if they do not understand. A consequence of this is that they often search contact with other foreigners who share the same experiences of staying abroad, misunderstanding the new culture and frustration. “*...This, too, is only natural; confused and overwhelmed by all that is happening to us, we take comfort in being among people we understand and who instinctively understand us.*” states Storti.

Storti, 58.

Storti, 33.

Cultural networks

Most of the time then, sojourners are searching for contact with people who come from a culture similar to their own. “*Their primary network is monocultural, and consists of bonds between compatriots. The main function of the co-national network is to provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed,*” states Bochner.

Bochner, 31.

These contacts are as important to the foreign student as contacts to the host-nation; monocultural networks are “*the safe harbor,*” because the other people are experiencing the same problems of living in a foreign culture and facing misunderstandings. Compatriots could be able, as well, to give important tips to each other about how things work, or what to pay attention to. One can have experienced something the other still has not, and therefore can prepare others for these kinds of happenings. From my own experience I can say that it is sometimes easier if another foreigner explains cultural differences or how things work to you. This is because a member of the host nation has a cultural behaviour that is normal to him, and does not see anything strange about it, and therefore could have problems trying to explain it.

Storti, 33.

In these monocultural networks, the sojourner can relax from the exhausting experience of living in a foreign culture; he has ‘time to breath’ while interacting with people without trying to interpret the other’s behaviour, or thinking about his own all the time. He may also have less language problems, because he can share the same language with other foreigners or could speak one he is more familiar with, for example, English.

But to feel comfortable in Mexico and at the UDLA, the foreign student needs more contact with the Mexican student population. By building “bicultural networks”, as Bochner calls it, the foreign student will get to understand the

Mexican culture and will learn how to behave, to react and to communicate with Mexicans. *“Those sojourners, whether students, business people or tourists, who do have some intimate contact with host members, seem to be more content, satisfied and successful than sojourners who have no such contact.”*

Bochner and Furnham, 250.

Both networks are very important for sojourners, they help to prevent or minimise emotional problems. Findings in medical and applied psychology suggest *“that social support is directly related to increased psychological well-being and to lower probability of physical and mental illness.”*

Bochner and Furnham, 184.

Intercultural relations between foreigners and members of the host-nation

A kind of culture shock can also arise on side of the host population when they have to deal with foreigners. Not only people who go abroad *“must learn to live with foreigners; those who stay at home are liable to encounter sojourners from abroad. Moreover, we are increasingly likely to encounter them in circumstances where it is prudent, even necessary, that we understand and get along with them.”*

Storti, 83.

For example, in the case of UDLA employees who have to attend to foreign students as part of their daily job at the university, it would be helpful to *“educate ourselves in this matter of cultural sensitivity.”* And, *“to remember that even as we struggle to understand the sojourners among us, they are likewise struggling to meet us halfway, educating themselves, as best they can...”* During my investigations at UDLA, I realised the importance of awareness of cultural differences. Some UDLA employees seemed to be offended by foreigners' behaviour. It has been strange for them, not adequate, and it has often been taken personal. If cultural sensitivity is missing, and both parts – foreigners and host-nation – are not prepared to encounter different behaviours or attitudes, they will not be able to communicate. Instead, as Bochner and Furnham name it, it will lead *“to the establishment of two hostile camps ritually ‘communicating’ with each other through mutual complaints and accusations, which often have a mirror-image quality about them.”* In UDLA, some examples of this ‘communication’ can be seen; when foreign students claim information missing and UDLA accuses them of not having read it, or UDLA employees are offended by them for ‘rude’ behaviour, while these complain about not being attended to rightly. These make it clear how important it would be to prepare foreign students and UDLA employees for the encounter of cultural differences, and the probability of problems arising during intercultural communication.

Storti, 83.

Storti, 83.

Bochner and Furnham, 202.

Therefore it would be very helpful if UDLA would provide usable information to appropriately inform its international students about their stay abroad – their responsibilities, possibilities and problems they could have to face. Likewise, if it would try to prepare its employees for those kind of intercultural encounters at the same time. Also, to try *“to create an atmosphere in which the development of friendship is facilitated”*, which could lead to increased contact and interaction between Mexican and foreign students.

Bochner and Furnham, 54.