

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

(AND REMEMBER WHILE YOU'RE THERE!)



DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Washington University in St. Louis
Overseas Programs
Stix House, Box 1088
www.artsci.wustl.edu/~overseas
overseas@wustl.edu
1-314-935-5958

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STUDY ABROAD: DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The degree to which you are willing to learn about and adjust to your host culture will in large part determine the extent of your ability to function well while abroad. You may return to WU as an expert on your site and culture, and we hope that developing this level of intercultural competence is one of your goals for your time abroad.

Sometimes your sojourn will feel like this:



Other times, it may feel more like this:



Take a moment now to note what you're most looking forward to and most worried about:

Think about how you've handled change before: what strategies work well for you in stressful situations and transitions?

Refer to these notes once you're abroad and compare your thoughts now with your experiences then.

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT: COPING WITH STRESS

Along the way, you may react strongly to the psychological disorientation most people experience when living for an extended period of time in a markedly different culture. You can think of this disorientation, commonly known as culture shock, as the occupational hazard of overseas living that you need to move through in order to experience another country and culture in depth.

Whether this is yet another chapter in your history of living abroad or the first time you have been outside the U.S., you will at some point hit a challenging cultural barrier. For some suggestions on sources and solutions, read on.

Sources of cultural stress:

- Being cut off from the cultural cues and known patterns with which you are familiar—especially the subtle, indirect ways you normally have of expressing feelings. All the nuances and shades of meaning that you instinctively understand and use to make your life comprehensible are suddenly taken from you.



- Living for an extended period of time in a situation that is ambiguous. Being continually put into positions in which you are expected to function with maximum skill and speed but where the rules have not been adequately explained.

- Having your own values (which you may have considered as absolutes) brought into question.

For some people the bout with culture shock is brief and hardly noticeable. These are usually people whose personalities provide them with a kind of natural immunity. For many of us, however, culture shock is something we'll have to deal with over a period of at least several months and possibly throughout the entire time we are abroad.

Cycles of cultural adjustment

Cultural adjustment progresses slowly. Some students quit their study abroad experience (either literally by coming home or figuratively by shutting down) while others work through it,

adjusting and adapting to the challenges around them. You may find that you cycle back and forth between some of the stages described below. Of course no one can predict the exact course of your time abroad, and we wouldn't want to try! We do hope that the knowledge that cross-cultural communication is difficult and tiring at times, and immensely rewarding at other times, will help you during the inevitable ups and downs of your study abroad experience.

1. Initial euphoria

Many students begin their sojourn abroad with great expectations and a positive mind-set. At this point, anything new is intriguing and exciting and the similarities stand out most. You may be impressed with how people everywhere are really very much alike. This period of euphoria may last from a week or two to a month, but the letdown is inevitable.

2. Irritation and hostility (a.k.a. culture shock)

Gradually, your focus may turn from the similarities to the differences. And these differences, which suddenly seem to be everywhere, are troubling. You blow up little, seemingly insignificant difficulties into major catastrophes.

Culture shock happens when the differences are narrowed down to a few of the most troubling and are then blown up out of proportion. (For Americans, standards of cleanliness, attitudes toward punctuality, and the value of human life tend to loom especially large.) By now you may be experiencing acute distress and tend to blame the host culture for the natural difficulties inherent in the cross-cultural encounter. This is the stage generally identified as "culture shock," and you may experience any of the symptoms below:



Symptoms of Culture Shock

Persistent homesickness	Psychosomatic illnesses
Persistent boredom	Unprovoked fits of weeping
Withdrawal	Loss of the ability to work effectively
Need for excessive sleep	Hostility towards host nationals
Compulsive eating	Stereotyping of host nationals
Compulsive drinking	Family tension and conflict
Irritability	

Not everyone will experience a severe case of culture shock, nor will all the symptoms be observed. Many people ride through culture shock with relative ease, only now and again experiencing the more serious reactions.

Distinctive features of culture shock:

- 1) Denial. Many returned students have commented (to paraphrase): 'I didn't have culture shock. It was just really hard to get used to the new language, banking hours, shopping habits, clothing styles, lack of email access, and teaching styles when I was abroad.' Don't be afraid to admit when you're struggling with an element of your host culture, whether you're living abroad for the first or fifth time, and talk to others about it.
- 2) It does not strike suddenly, but is instead cumulative. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events that are difficult to identify.
- 3) It does not result from a specific event or series of events. It comes instead from the experience of encountering ways of doing, organizing, perceiving or valuing things which are different from yours and which threaten your basic, unconscious belief that your culture's customs, assumptions, values and behaviors are natural. Culture shock is often confused with frustration, and although they are related, and similar in emotional content, they do differ. Frustration is always traceable to a specific action or cause and goes away when the situation is remedied or the cause is removed. Frustration may be uncomfortable, but it is generally short-lived when compared to culture shock.

Minimizing the impact of cultural stress

- Accept the fact that you will make mistakes and give yourself permission to fail. If you haven't already, stumbling through your first few days with your host family or navigating the unfamiliar bureaucracy of your host university is a great way to learn to drop the ball with grace. **A healthy sense of humor can be invaluable.**



- Learn as much as possible about where you are. By looking consciously for logical reasons behind what seems difficult, confusing, or threatening, you will reinforce the positive attitude that in fact there are explanations behind what you observe in the host culture.

- Don't succumb to the temptation to disparage the host culture. Resist making jokes and comments such as "Well, what else would you expect from (fill in nationality) people?" intended to illustrate the stupidity of the local population, and don't hang around the Americans who do make them.

- Find your cultural wizard. Identify a host national (a neighbor, a friendly acquaintance) who is sympathetic and understanding, and talk with that person about specific situations and about your feelings related to them. **Talking with Americans can be helpful, but only to a limited extent. Your problem lies in your relationship to the host culture.**



Above all, have faith—in yourself, in the essential good will of your hosts, and in the positive outcome of the experience. Know that the above responses can occur, that culture shock is in some degree inevitable, and that reactions are emotional and not easily subject to rational management.

3. Gradual adjustment

This step may come so gradually that, at first, you will be unaware it is happening. Once you begin to orient yourself and are able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues, the culture seems more familiar. You become more comfortable in it and feel less isolated from it. Gradually, too, your sense of humor returns and you realize the situation is not hopeless after all.



4. Adaptation or biculturalism



Cultural adaptation will result in an ability to function in two cultures with confidence. You will even find a great many customs, ways of doing and saying things, and personal attitudes to which you have in some degree acculturated -- and which you will definitely miss when you pack up and return to the U.S.



GENDER ISSUES

The roles of men and women in society vary greatly from culture to culture. To learn about things like dating, gender discrimination, women's safety, and other such topics you should consult guidebooks or talk to people who have experience in the culture. But here is some basic advice for men and women.

Perception of American women

Let's face it, "Baywatch" and "Sex and the City" haven't helped the international image of American women. In many countries and cultures, American women are stereotyped as morally or sexually "loose." If you wear clothing inappropriate to the culture, move too quickly in a relationship, or flirt overzealously, you will not help that perception. If anything, behave conservatively at first until you figure things out.

Harassment

In St. Louis, you seldom see men whistling, hooting or staring at women. Such incidents are generally far more common in many other cultures, though of course not all. Students who have spent time in Jerusalem report being stared at or shouted at as they walked by. In that culture, it is inappropriate for men to behave in such a manner, and they seldom do so to local women. Here's the key: ASK LOCAL WOMEN WHAT TO DO. They can teach you a few choice phrases to yell, and it works.

Students who study in Southern Europe or Latin America may have different experiences. They often receive lots of attention and harassment, but so may their female host national friends. In that culture, it is expected. Returned students advise women studying in these regions to observe the local women and learn to ignore the unwanted attention.

Dating

If you want to date, figure out the norms of your host culture. Ask a host family member, a local friend, etc. Women and men should generally be more cautious than in the U.S. Find out the laws governing sexual assault at your site. In some countries, any sexual encounter that happens after a woman has agreed to enter a man's room is considered consensual, and the concept of date rape is



unknown. Other cultures may have trouble understanding the American concept of casually dating several people at once. To them, if you date, you are in a relationship. Sure, you can break up and start dating someone else as soon as you want, but if you date two people at once, you are cheating. The point is to realize that there are differences and to understand what to expect in your host culture.

What to do

Be careful at first, and figure things out with the advice of a local friend. Learn the local laws.

Learn the differences between what you are accustomed to at home and the way your host culture works. Respect the culture - you are not there to change it; you are there to learn about it.



Bottom Line: Have fun, experience life, but understand and respect the differences between your home culture and host culture.



SAFETY GUIDELINES

Be alert

- Be alert to your surroundings and the people with whom you have contact
- Be wary of people who seem overly friendly or interested in you
- Learn which areas of town should be avoided. If you find yourself in uncomfortable surroundings, act confident
- Be prepared for an emergency
- Have phone numbers of program contacts handy at all times
- Know how to reach a doctor, a hospital or clinic, and the police in the country in which you are traveling
- Have sufficient funds or a credit card on hand for emergencies —especially purchasing a train or airline ticket, or medical care

Blend in

- Do not dress or behave in a manner that will easily identify you as a tourist. Returned student suggest avoiding clothing with large logos and talking more quietly than you would in the U.S.
- Integrate yourself as fully as possible into the university community
- Be sensitive about what you photograph



Stay informed

- Review U.S. State Department Travel Advisories concerning the countries or region to which you will be traveling: http://travel.state.gov/warnings_list.html
- Keep informed through radio and television broadcasts and by reading the newspaper and the internet
- Register at and know the location of your embassy

Stay in touch

- Maintain regular contact with your U.S. and host families so that others are assured of your safety
- Maintain regular contact with your program director or host institution coordinator
- When traveling away from your host institution, notify someone other than those traveling with you — preferably your host contact or director — of your itinerary

Avoid theft

- Keep valuable items in a safe place- lock up valuables in hostel/hotel safe when touring a city
- Don't take non-essential items such as expensive jewelry abroad with you- if you can't replace it, don't bring it.
- Don't keep all of your documents and money in one suitcase or location on your person
- Don't flash large amounts of money: carry and use small bills or credit/debit cards whenever possible
- Be discrete in displaying your passport when necessary
- Carry your purse or wallet so that it cannot be easily taken, especially in public transportation and other crowded public places
- Do not carry anything valuable in the back pocket of your backpack or pants
- Avoid situations and locations popularly identified with tourists/Americans
- Get in and out of airports, train, buses and subway stations as promptly as possible
- Avoid traveling or going out alone
- Do not leave your bags unattended (even briefly!) in an airport, bus or train station

Be smart

- Consume alcohol in a responsible and culturally-appropriate fashion
- Don't accept rides with friends or acquaintances who've had too much to drink
- Don't use illegal drugs
- This is still real life - consider the consequences of your behavior



MINORITIES ABROAD

Societal attitudes toward race and sexual orientation are cultural constructs. Those attitudes are altered considerably across cultures, and WU students traveling abroad inevitably bump into them. Those bumps can be jarring, particularly if students go abroad with unrealistic expectations about how they will be perceived by the host culture. You may need to take a deep breath from time to time and remind yourself that this is a learning experience. You'll be learning a great deal about a foreign culture, and about your own cultural identity in juxtaposition to it.

The Overseas Programs office has resources focusing on the experiences of women, people of color, and GLBT people traveling abroad. The following comments can serve as a starting point for your pre-departure research.

Cultural reactions to color

Responding to the question, "What were the biggest differences between your experience as a person of color abroad as opposed to your experience in the USA?" University of Iowa student Natasha Robinson wrote, "It seems that racism is a little more noticeable in the USA than in Spain. I deal with it on a daily basis but in Spain it seemed that the people reacted to my color due to never seeing an African American in real life, rather than the prejudiced attitudes that some people have about African Americans here."

James Brook's article "U.S. Blacks Find Visits to Brazil Bittersweet" in the New York Times (June 1994) explains, "On and off campus, a semester here gives African Americans a rapid introduction to the complexity of Brazil's race relations. On one level, there are the daily racial slights in a country where the average income of blacks is less than half that of whites. In elegant shopping centers, store clerks often drag their feet in waiting on black customers. At currency-exchange shops a counter attendant will look suspiciously at a young black woman with dollars. 'His whole face changed when I opened my mouth,' said Rashida Sykes, another Spelman student here. Addison Le Platte, a business student from Morehouse College, put it bluntly: 'You move into English when you don't want to be bothered.'"

Kianga Ford mentions her experience through Georgetown University's program in Tanzania: "Tanzania found me a minority of one, one 'black American' female student feeling looked at—the only one, to my knowledge, in the country. When I walked down the street. I was always followed by dozens of eyes and there was always the echo from people that could hazard a guess, 'ah black American...black American...' Even in a country with centuries of Arab influence and more shades of brown than you can imagine, schoolchildren followed me and chimed 'half-caste.' One old man near the Serengeti, more in grunt than in English, told me my very existence was a sin. In short, there was no homecoming party waiting for me. It was a beautiful country for no expectations. Everyone will not see things as I did. Some of you may feel completely embraced in your journeys home, and whatever the outcome, they are worth it. If there is one thing that I could say to those of you 'in search of...' it is to please travel with an open mind. Expect nothing. Be open to anything."

Hung T. Quan of the University of Montana describes his study in Hong Kong: "In essence, I have come to understand the deeper implications of my standing as an Asian American. Because of my experiences in both cultures, I cannot feel completely comfortable in either culture, but belong instead in the interface between the two of them. I consider this realization as the most valuable result of my experiences in Hong Kong. In light of my experiences, my advice to *any* student who is considering going abroad is to do it. Regardless of whether you are a first, second, or 'nth' generation immigrant. I feel cultural identity and roots are important facts that need to be explored. "

GLBT issues

You should keep in mind that how homosexuality is defined (sometimes not at all) may be very different from here. Just like here, everyone is different and some people are going to be receptive and other people are not. Every country, city, or section of town has a set of norms to follow. Get to know those norms and how you are expected to act within them.

Council on International Educational Exchange's [Work, Study, Travel Abroad: The Whole World Handbook](#) mentions that: "A worldwide movement for gay and lesbian rights has brought the issue of homosexuality to the forefront of public discourse in many countries.

This step toward recognition of a historically suppressed group, however, has in many instances met with harassment and violence." Since attitudes toward homosexuality differ according to many variables within a particular country, culture or individuals, you may want to consult travel guides such as *Let's Go* and *the Real World Travel Guides* with sections on issues of interest to LGBT students preparing to go abroad.

Besides our own Gay and Lesbian Community Alliance (5-5349), consider the following resources:

www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay/student.htm

An outstanding resource assembled by NAFSA's Rainbow SIG, a GLBT special interest group within the national organization for international education. Specifics about study abroad for LGBT students and links to numerous articles and country-specific sites.

www.iglhrc.org

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission gives information about current events and laws for LGBT people in specific countries.

www.ilga.org

Country-by-country listing of laws pertaining to LGBT people and same-sex behavior.

www.gaylesissues.about.com/cs/international/index.htm

Information about international LGBT issues.

www.gayguide.net/index2.html

Country-by-country information obtained from returnees about climate.

www.damron.com/

GLBT travel guides.



**Anti-Americanism Abroad:
Students Share Foreign Perspectives on War**
By Amy Johnson (Excerpted from Transitions Abroad, April 2003)

The principal concern for students abroad right now is the idea that there is an overwhelming sentiment of anti-Americanism across the globe that may in turn manifest itself in the form of harassment or violence toward American students. Although those overseas are definitely in contact with attitudes more potent than those displayed in the U.S., students report that the most common emotion directed at them is curiosity, not anger or resentment.

"From the moment I stepped off the plane, my first taxi driver wanted to know what I have to say about the war," said Sarah Fox, who is studying in Berlin, Germany. "Occasionally my German friends tease me about supporting Bush or being a warmonger, but beyond that it seems that the German people are really more interested in hearing my own opinions." Erin Goulding, a student studying in Galway, Ireland, agreed. "People here, especially the taxi drivers, are always dying to hear the American opinions on the war," she said.

As for the issue of safety, students generally agree that the citizens of most countries, regardless of whether they or their administrations support the war, are able to distinguish between American foreign policy and Americans.

"I've had some interesting conversations with French people I meet about politics, and they all generally say that the French are not against the American public at all, only against American politics," said Kristin Smith, who is spending the semester in Paris. "I feel safer here than I would in America right now, and I really am much more afraid for the people at home than myself," she said. Fox expressed a similar feeling of security. "I have at no time felt in any danger in this country," she said. "I think the German people have been really good about making the distinction between the American government and the American people."

Although most students regard their host countries as welcoming and sensitive to American opinion regardless of their personal views, Robert Shenk described a slightly more unreceptive sentiment in his Moroccan peers: "People here are sensitive to my concerns as an American, but they tend to be a bit closed-minded regarding their viewpoints," he said. "While people are open to my point of view, they seem to condemn America without sufficient arguments. They have a hard time stepping back and looking at issues as a whole. Overall, my experience has been awesome and I'm learning a great deal about how others view America."

Shenk's last statement effectively captures the dominant viewpoint of students studying elsewhere right now--that the perceived dangers of being away from the on-campus safety net are negligible compared with the opportunity to learn about another culture at such a disruptive time. "I don't think people want to come home, but they want to know they can come home," said Marian B. St. Onge, director of Boston College's Center for International Partnerships and Programs. "I think it's a great learning experience for people to be in the world at this difficult time, as long as they're not uncomfortable."

St. Onge also described several of the procedures that had been planned in case of emergency, highlighting strategies such as telephone trees and established meeting points between the on-site coordinators and the students in any given city. As of now she doesn't think these will become necessary as long as students take basic precautions, but she acknowledged that having solid plans available is a crucial step in maintaining the comfort levels of both students and parents.

As for the feeling of anti-Americanism abroad, although students report that it is not as severe as those in the U.S. may think, students should remain open-minded and try not to take any offending remarks personally.



RETURNING TO THE U.S.

Before you know it, it's time to head back to the U.S.

– which can be a disturbing mixture of pleasure and pain. Pleasure because you are returning to all you love in the States, and pain at leaving all you have grown to love in your host country.



Unfortunately, leaving a new home, new friends, and a new culture you have grown accustomed to, makes returning to the States quite a bit more complicated than just stepping off the plane. Some things to be prepared for upon re-entry to the United States include the following:

Reverse culture shock



Basically, this consists of feeling out of place in your own country, or experiencing a sense of disorientation. While everything is familiar, *you* feel different. Even walking through the airport and hearing American English spoken can be a very surreal experience.

Re-establishing relationships

People you were close with when you left, even those you kept in good contact with, will be separated from you by the unique experiences you have had in each other's absence. However, this separation is certainly not permanent, and new experiences can make for some very interesting conversation. Just keep in mind that since both of you have changed, you won't necessarily interact in the same way.

Sharing your experience

Since only you have had your experience, there is no possible way that anyone can fully understand what you have gone through. While people will be interested in what you did abroad, no one will be quite as interested as you. But there are ways to leverage your experience – whether through volunteering to mentor a new international student at WU or participating in panel discussions during study abroad information sessions.

Readjusting

Fitting your new life into your old one can be frustrating. Since every country has a unique approach to life, it can be difficult if you're used to operating within cultural mode, or have made that approach to life a part of you, to return to the U.S. where the rules

are different. It's easy to become frustrated with aspects of U.S. culture that no longer make sense to you. Try to keep things in perspective. Bear in mind that every country has its flaws and its strengths.

Just as it is possible to dramatize the glory of your return home, it is also possible once you've returned home to over-romanticize your experience abroad. Home is not the impenetrable haven you might remember it as at times, and life would still not be flawless, even if you were back in the host country you left behind.

A few things might make re-entry a little easier: talk to others who have studied abroad, keep in touch with those you met abroad, use the emotional momentum to continue cultural interactions, and be patient with yourself and others. Savor the rare privilege of having two 'homes'!

