

CULTURE SHOCK

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Table of Content

1. Abstract
2. The Notion of Culture Shock
3. My Experience of Culture Shock in America
4. How to Endure Culture Shock
5. References

ABSTRACT

Culture shock is a state one might experience when being in a new surrounding and atmosphere, meeting lots of new people, and learning the way of life of a different country. Culture shock also makes people uncertain when they are separated from family, friends, and colleagues. In foreign country, they have nobody to ask advice, support and help in the difficult situations. In the state of culture shock, people start to miss the favourite food, native language, familiar smells and tastes.

Culture shock is the usual way of reaction of our organism on the new country and its culture. It happens as a result of changing our accustomed way of life and adaptation to new one.

Keywords: culture shock, reverse culture shock, phases of culture shock

CULTURE SHOCK

The Notion of Culture Shock

Culture shock is a problem that disturbs people who travel abroad. Culture shock breaks out when the person is far from the family, hears the sound of foreign language, misunderstands people of another nation and is unfamiliar with food. Culture shock is the state of feeling different way, moreover, it is a state when everything is unusual from the one to which a person has accustomed. One cannot avoid culture shock, as it is the normal reaction of organism to the new culture, traditions and the way of life.

Without doubt culture shock is the problem that touches foreign students and immigrants. No matter how you have prepared to meet a new culture, in any case, you will face this problem. This paper distinguishes the causes of such a psychological phenomenon. First of all, culture shock is caused by absence and missing of one's own culture. When people listen to his/her national music or meet people of his/her nationality and feel as the happiest person in the world.

Another cause is the presence of irrational, offensive, hostile and even inscrutable factors of the strange culture. When people are abroad they feel themselves defenseless and weak, but when they come back home they feel themselves free, protected and happy.

The next cause of culture shock is lack of linguistic abilities and fear of being misunderstood. Even if people can speak any foreign language fluently, they are not confident in their knowledge; they feel panic, fear and might not be able to pronounce any word. They always get in the unpleasant situations, because of poor language skills.

The main symptoms of culture shock are physical discomfort, anger, frustration, a desire to come back home, too much or too little sleep, changes in mood, emotional state and behavior, idealization of one's own country, constant comparison and contrast of one's own traditions with the foreign ones, lack of confidence, feelings of being abused, exploited and lost. These symptoms are different in all people and depend on the character of a personality. One can understand other culture when he/she experiences culture shock that is the preparation stage. The surrounding has a great impact on people's appearance and behavior.

My Experience of Culture Shock in America

I am from the United Arab Emirates and I am now studying in America; that is why culture shock is a familiar phenomenon for me. I would like to tell you about my experience of culture shock. As you might know, usually there are four defined stages of experiencing culture shock: “honeymoon phase”, “negotiation phase”, “adjustment phase” and “mastery phase”. Now I can say that I am a little familiar with the notion of the culture shock; however, at first when I faced it, I was not so optimistic (Lee, 2007). I have found a lot of similarities in American culture and culture of the United Arabic Emirates as both these cultures have cosmopolitan, multicultural and diverse society.

When I came to America for the first time, I was really excited. Everything was presented for me in the bright colours. I was impressed, inspired, surprised by many things. I could not stop learning new things about this country. I felt as if I were on the other planet. Even when I did not understand language (as among American youth slang is very popular and difficult for understanding) it seemed to me very entertaining. Language barrier did not disturb me at all. I did not perceive any problems as the real problems. I was constantly in search of new knowledge and information. The United Arabic

Emirates is multilingual country that is why our culture is rich and diverse and we know not only our language but also at least one foreign. So, language barrier was not the most difficult for me.

Every country has its own culture, traditions, moral norms and values. In America, I did not understand the behavior of girls. Since in my country, relations between boys and girls are less open. For example, girls could touch boys if they felt attraction to them. I needed some time to comprehend the behavior of American girls. In my country, it is rude to look straight into someone's eyes, but in America eye contact is important for arranging good relationships with people. At first sight, these differences seemed small and unimportant; however, I needed some time to accustom myself to them.

I was also impressed by the American food: hamburgers, cheeseburgers, chips and other types of fast food. It was unusual for me as in my country people eat food like fish, rice, meat, and vegetable dishes. In comparison to my country, family dinner is a traditional event and all family has to respect it. In America, there are family dinners too, however, only at the special occasions. Our food traditions were different, so I began to get acquainted with the American cuisine. I liked that there were a lot of restaurants with any kind of international cuisine. I must say that every cuisine no matter Arabic or American is tasteful and delicious in its own way (UKCISA, 2012).

The quick lifestyle, delicious food, various traditions and customs attracted me. I felt freedom and independence. I felt myself like in a fairy tale as I have never seen so many people of different nationalities, cultures and languages at once. People were dressed very brightly and sometimes defiantly. Nevertheless, in my country, people wear clothes more colourful, simple and unobtrusive (Lee, 2007).

Life in the United Arab Emirates is similar with America's style of life. Life is fast paced. Americans never judge you by your physical appearance. They have more liberty and confidence to do whatever they want. I observed that Americans evaluate time and regret when they waste it in vain. They use every minute to read and try something new. Even in overcrowded transport you can see people reading a book. American culture differs them from other nations. I was shocked that even in traffic jam they found what to do. In the United Arab Emirates, students are also independent and free. They do not lose possibility to study abroad and to travel. Without doubt the Arab world is cosmopolitan, not an isolated and insulated culture. It was the crossroads of the world and, like the United States, has been enriched by the contributions of many cultures European, American, Greek, Turkish, etc.

American people were friendly and always smiling and that is why it created the atmosphere of comfort and protection. However, it does not mean that they are going to be friends with you. I noticed that Americans are polite, friendly and smiling. They always could help you when you are lost in the overcrowded place or in the search of any place. In the United Arab Emirates people are also kind and friendly that is why there are a lot of tourists from other countries.

For me "honeymoon phase" was full of new discoveries, observations and impressions. Indeed, American culture and lifestyle are absolutely different from those that are in Arabic countries. I got to know that the role of woman in America is not the same as in the United Arab Emirates.

After "honeymoon phase", I moved to "negotiation phase" without knowing it. Without doubt it was a difficult period for me as my not perfect knowledge of language and cultural background of American nation put me in the confusing situations. I felt myself ignorant and had nobody to support me, as I had no relatives in America. It was the hardest phase of

culture shock. At that period, American people who surrounded me and with whom I communicated considered me as a foreign student and I felt myself ignored and lonely.

At the “negotiation phase”, I began to distinguish the differences between my native culture and new one and these differences shocked me very often and created anxiety (Lee, 2007). Unlikeness in traffic safety and food intensified the sense of isolation from other people. Living far from my home, without parents and friends was hard at this phase.

Sometimes when I asked something in the supermarket, at the university or in the streets people could laugh at me or be offended by my questions. I did not know how to conduct myself in the different situations and I did not want to be laughed at. I did not understand gestures and was very embarrassed and depressed. My ignorance provoked not only laughter, but also anger and irritation. Moreover, I began to think that something is wrong with me and I was hard on myself that I had chosen the American university for studying.

I continually got into uncomfortable situations such as misunderstanding sellers, losing my keys or missing the bus. I was not conscious why after such satisfaction and pleasant impression from the country, I felt myself disappointed, disillusioned and homesickness followed me.

America was not attractive for me anymore, frivolity and carelessness of young people irritated me, food was not that tasty anymore and soon I lost my appetite. I felt myself as I were sick and suffered from the unknown disease. I remembered my country as the most fantastic and the most exotic place.

After “negotiation phase” I moved to the “adjustment phase”. It was the

most lasted phase and very difficult to go through (UKCISA, 2012). I wanted to come back home and these were unbearable feelings as it was impossible and I had to study. Indeed, the “adjustment phase” was like any form of disease. I had no desire to study; also I did not admire the architecture and places of interests, which took my breath before.

At this phase, I learnt to understand American humour and developed my own. I was interested in American language, customs and cultures in order to struggle with my depression and stress. I liked everything about America; however, I found a lot of interesting things for myself. At this phase, I began to plan, analyze my achievements and faults. I did not see life in America anymore as something different and my admiration and impressions by the lifestyle of American people turned into everyday routine (2012).

At first, I thought that my depression would never end. However, fortunately in two months, I moved to the “mastery phase”. I could not even believe that my sufferings were now gone. I was really exhausted after the changes and struggling with my unstable emotional state.

Without doubt, I felt as I was just born, fresh and full of energy. It meant that I returned to my usual way of life and adapted to the new country. The “mastery phase” was not total adaptation and complete understanding of another culture. However, I was on the way to the happy and full value life in America and I began to recover from such unusual disease about which I did not know at that time as culture shock. At the “mastery phase”, I improved my language skills and my self-estimation. I accepted differences adequately and tolerantly. I knew that I could not change my surroundings and that is why I overcame all difficulties.

How to Endure Culture Shock

When it comes to culture shock, one should remember that to avoid this emotional state is impossible. The main thing is to try to be busy with any affair and never stay lonely. It is necessary to understand that culture shock is inevitable state, which demands time and adaptation. From my point of view, one should believe that everything will pass and be optimistic in spite of bad mood and sad times.

I also came to the conclusion that it is easier to endure culture shock when you are confident in your language skills. Knowledge of language makes the way of integration simpler and ruins some barriers and obstacles. In order to better the emotional state, one should release all feelings: to laugh, cry and communicate.

It is easy for me to describe my culture shock in America now, but it was difficult to experience it. My English was not perfect and that is why I did not understand American slang. If I knew it before coming to the USA, I would avoid those misunderstandings. I also had bad experience with food, because as I was depressed and stressed I ate a lot of fast food without caring that I could gain weight. As you understand, I had also problems with the odd weight. However, soon with the adaption I was able to overcome that problem.

From my personal experience, it is necessary to get acquainted with the foreign traditions and respect them as one's own. Hostility and anger will never benefit you. The main component of culture shock is homesickness. As for me, the hardest moment was when my family came to visit me. I wanted to cry and the strongest desire was to come back home. It was difficult to stand homesickness.

In conclusion, I am glad that I am studying in America and in spite that fact that I suffered from culture shock for several months it was a good experience for me. I have learnt to adapt to new culture and new people. Now I feel myself comfortable and protected. Currently, I feel that I am at the right place and I do not feel any more isolated and different. I do not forget my native country and my traditions.