



The Do-It-Yourself Culture Shock Survival Kit¹

Ted Ward²

Prevention, Recognition, and Cure of the Missionary Occupational Hazard

Cameron Dayton got up, pulled a big towel around himself, and went out into the night. Stumbling along after the unsteady beam, he located the offender, seized him by the throat, and beat him to death with the flashlight. He went back to his cot, pulled the mosquito netting down, and slept soundly the rest of the night.

Wow! This is missionary life? There's more to the story. (By the way, it happened recently and you may have already heard about it. I don't know the young man, but one of his fellow missionaries told me, and I never doubt the word of a missionary. Well, almost never.)

Considering the strange situation and irrational behavior, it sounds like a case of culture shock. Maybe; maybe not. All the conditions were right for culture shock. The young man was quite young—taking a couple of years out of his college career for an overseas experience. Bangladesh had presented some very difficult situations to adjust to. Hunger and disease were on every side, pressing in like the awful hand of tragedy that such poverty really is.

Cam hadn't been overseas very long, and he was still running into the disturbing jolts that come with being in a strange place. Nothing was like home. It was not clear why he had come. It all sounded so reasonable back in the United States, but once he was face-to-face with the conditions in Bangladesh it no longer seemed hopeful. Having any sort of faith at all became, for one of the few times in Cam's life, a really big problem. The Scriptures and prayers that sounded so easy back home had taken on a gutsy reality. "I really do have needs that I didn't know about. What *does* it all mean?"

Sleep had been one of Cam's biggest problems. Going half way around the world turns your inside clock upside down and it isn't easy to get back in tune with yourself. Not getting enough sleep can be "the final straw that breaks the camel's back". Pretty soon you get angry, really angry, at anything that messes up your physical condition so you begin lashing out.

The rural situation itself is strange to most Americans nowadays. The early morning rooster's crowing was once everyone's alarm clock, but today many of us have never heard the marvelous night sounds of the countryside that make you drowsy or angry, depending on what you're used to. Cam had been sleeping through traffic and train noises all his life; but, you see, this nutty rooster was different—and Cam got angry.

¹ Ted Ward. The Do-It-Yourself Culture Shock Survival Kit. *Wherever*. Vol. 2 (2) Fall 1977: 2-5. A publication of TEAM (The Evangelical Alliance Mission). Used with permission.

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Let's be fair about it. Not even a Bangladesian rooster has any business squawking at 3 a.m. This annoyance had been going on for several nights, so Cam decided it had to stop. He groped for the flashlight on the dusty floor beside his cot You've already heard the rest of the story.

It's not too wise to run around the world beating roosters with flashlights (a chicken may be somebody's best friend) but it's likely that every one of us in cross-cultural work has done or will do something similar at one time or another. Some of these strange acts we won't be able to explain—even to ourselves. The mind gets bogged down in things we can't really comprehend and, all of a sudden, the rational processes come to a halt. Culture shock!

What is Culture Shock?

A scientific explanation of culture shock has not yet been given. Different things bring it on for different people, and the symptoms don't look the same in everyone. Basically, culture shock is an emotional and mental stalemate brought about by experiences in a culture that contrast too much with the culture to which a person is accustomed.

One of the best explanations is based on a communication concept. When you think of the human mind as an information-processing system, you can see culture shock as an overloading that causes the mental process channels to clog up and blow the fuses. Though not very precise, this picture is not a bad way to get hold of the idea.

Your senses, especially your eyes and ears, are constantly feeding signals into your brain. Some you ignore, but others you "process". You make *sense* out of the signals by connecting them with experiences from your past. What's that blinding flash? Oh, sure, just another photographer with a strobe. What sense could you make of portable lighting if you'd never seen a flash camera before?

Blah, what a taste! No problem, just likely needs some salt. Making sense of data from your environment lets you decide how to act or what to do. But if an experience doesn't ring any bells, you may not know what to do. And after too much of that sort of not knowing, you may become afraid to do anything at all! By the way, that's why I'm not too worried about Cam's encounter with the rooster. The most serious form of culture shock produces inactivity, not just erratic actions.

Culture is complex. There are so many things we take for granted that we tend to be unaware of the tremendous chessboard we live on. Up, down, sideways, diagonally, everything has a familiarity to us—we're used to it, whether or not it is really logical. Take a look at the decorations and trimmings on your own clothes right now. It all fits together to make an "okay" appearance. Of the thousands of ways to put things together, it's your culture (or sub-culture) that says what's okay. Why do you eat with your fork in your strong hand? Why the fork at all? What's okay with the fingers? Why? Who should you sit with? Who not? When do you smile? Why?

What does it mean when someone belches? When someone laughs at you? When you aren't asked to sit down? When someone shakes a stick at you? When the agreed time to meet arrives and there's no one there but you? These questions have cultural meanings, and when you don't know the "code" you feel left out and, very likely, more than a little frightened. So if, after a while, it really gets to you, you withdraw into a sort of super-sober stupor. Culture Shock!

Reducing Culture Shock

What can be done to make culture shock less likely? When we hold training workshops for people going overseas, we try to get at three things.

Empathy. First, we help the trainees look at their own interpersonal relationships. How a person relates to others is the basic foundation for cross-cultural effectiveness. Can you trust others? Do you accept help from others?

Many Americans place great importance on being independent and having their own way about things. That may work out fairly well in our own country, but there are very few places outside North America and Europe where it is socially accepted. People are expected to need each other, especially within the extended family to which they happen to belong. This sort of mutually dependent relationship is built on sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others. So in our training, we provide experiences and learning exercises in which a person learns to focus on the other person's viewpoint, to feel as others feel—*empathy*, it's called.

One of the more useful exercises is to take some behavior or attitude you see in someone else and try hard to think of some reason why the other person does this or feels this way. You'll know that this exercise is working when you begin to be really generous and non-judgmental. You'll begin to make up alibis and excuses in your mind for other people and you'll be more willing to see their side of the story.

Observation Skills. Second, we try to help people become more alert to what is going on around them. This can be very rewarding within a short period of time. Through observation games and drills, a person can "turn on" to a wealth of information that he or she has been mostly ignoring.

You can try an observation drill right now. Close your eyes and re-construct the scene you are now seeing out of the corners of your eyes. With your eyes still closed, try to spot something in your recall of the general scene that you haven't already thought about. Why is that window down from the top? How did that paint get scraped? Who left that small green object over there in the corner? and so on. Then take a very quick peek out the window or off to the left and start the game again.

If you do this sort of thing several times a day you will develop a lot more self-confidence about your ability to see things and to become aware of the interesting little questions that can be raised about things otherwise taken for granted. Perhaps the greatest value lies in learning the usefulness of "why" questions. Many of us were discouraged from asking "why?" when we were kids. Now's the time to get back into the habit! But, even as a child asks "why?" because he or she wants to learn, you have to *want* to learn about your own environment. Don't wait until you get overseas; start now!

Transactional Exploration. The third way to deal with new and unknown experiences is to relate to them experimentally. Rather than becoming rigid and frightened because you lack information, or becoming "lost" for lack of a model to copy, get in there and *try* something!

This "trying out" is what we call transaction: do something and see what happens. As a child, you learned more this way than any other. It's a high capability that you never lose, though as you grow older, it is important to depend more on previous experience and the knowledge it has built within you. When you encounter something really new, something that your past experience doesn't cover, you can always fall back on transactional exploration.

Scientifically, transactional exploration is called “inquiry learning” or “discovery learning;” it is building inductively from the tangible experience toward the generalized meaning. In common-sense terms, it involves finding out through trial and error. Though in cross-cultural matters you don’t want to do too many things that are going to make things worse, it is better to *do* than not to do—to act rather than to freeze up. When you freeze, you stop learning!

How to Cope

Americans overseas run into difficulties in adjusting to those things that are most closely associated with personal security and personal freedom in America. Health, safety, communication, and mobility are at the top of the list. No matter how well prepared you are, the little “surprises” add up. They can pull the rug right out from under your self-confidence.

By no means is this an excuse for being unprepared. The first step to take in preparation for any overseas assignment is to get background information. Reading is valuable; so is talking with others who have been there. Coping strategy number one is to build a knowledge background, ideally including language skill.

Coping strategy number two is to copy a reliable model. The skills of observation and effective copying can be developed. There are many social cues that can be picked up by making a habit of waiting for someone else who is more “at home” to set the example, before you go blazing ahead with your own notion of how something should be done.

The third and most open-ended and flexible coping strategy is in creatively acting upon your best insights in such a way as to watch the effects and quickly make appropriate adjustments. You might even think of it as a game: you observe and draw inferences, act on the inferences, observe the feedback and consequences, and revise your inferences and subsequent actions accordingly. What we are describing here is an application of practical social science skills to life.

The Ethical Problem

The Apostle Paul wrote of the necessity of adapting himself and adjusting his own tastes and preferences to the local conditions:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law . . . so as to win those To the weak, I became weak I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel that I may share in its blessings. (I Corinthians 9:19-23, NIV)

How much and what kinds of adjustments can be made without compromising one’s integrity is a big ethical issue. Each of us must know where we stand on matters of right and wrong. Something that is morally wrong in the dormitory at Western State isn’t going to become morally right just because it is happening in Kinshasa.

On the other hand, many of us give unwarranted moral meaning to matters which are really matters of cultural conditioning and taste. It’s certainly not a sinful compromise to drive on the left side of the road in England; nor is it wrong for an urban American to smile at strangers on the street in an African village where everyone smiles at everybody.

Summary

Culture shock is real. The explanations—when and why it occurs—aren't all alike. Maybe culture shock is a general name for several things all rolled together:

1. The emotional anxiety of being in strange surroundings.
2. The disorientation of not being able to predict what other people are going to do.
3. The discomfort of not knowing what one should do to handle the situation, and
4. The overwhelming feeling of incompetency that comes from experiencing so many sensory stimuli that don't have clear meanings.

As it looks from my experience overseas and from talking with students who have just returned from short-term experiences in other cultures, culture shock is some mixture of all four of these conditions, but especially the fourth. In other words, most of us can handle short periods of any of the first three without going into shock. But when the first leads to the second, and to the third, and the fourth sets in, you've had it! You're in shock. All the signals coming in are getting blocked. Nothing makes sense. What's that funny smell? What's that weird noise? Why is he doing that? Where did she go? What's that for? Why are they looking at me like that? Why? When? What? Who? Where? . . . *Help!*

Overload. So? Get help to prepare yourself. Culture shock can be prevented!