

Theory Reflections: Cultural Adaptations, Culture Shock and the “Curves of Adjustment”

The Rise and Fall of an Iconic Model of Intercultural Adjustment

One of the most powerful, practical, and productive concepts in the field of international educational exchange is that of “culture shock,” described as the physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions that often occur when individuals are attempting to live, work, or study in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Culture shock remains a core concept within the fields of anthropology, psychology, and intercultural communication, and is almost universally referenced in orientation and reentry training in both education abroad (Church 1982) and corporate contexts (Black and Mendenhall 1991).

The “U” and “W” curves of adjustment models emerged and evolved alongside the “culture shock” concept, usually accompanied by visual illustrations that purported to describe and even predict a “typical” trajectory that such stressful encounters would produce. While culture shock remains a viable and useful theoretical and explanatory tool, the parallel “curves” have not held up nearly as well, in spite of their almost iconic status among trainers and the general public. In short, “curves” have not withstood critical empirical testing and research. How and why did this delinking occur? And, even if they are no longer considered accurate, how could one use them for heuristic purposes? How would you need to context them, and what cautions about applying them too literally would you need to convey to students?

The Emergence of *Culture Shock* As a Theoretical Category

Culture shock is a relatively recent theoretical construct even if the behaviors associated with the discomfort of crossing cultural boundaries can be found as far back as classical Greek literature. In 1951, anthropologist Cora DuBois first publicly used the term “culture shock” to describe the disorienting experience that many anthropologists face when entering different cultures (Paige 1993), although fellow Columbia University anthropologist Ruth Benedict may have been the original source. In 1954, Kalervo Oberg used and expanded DuBois’ term to be applicable to all people who travel abroad into new cultures in his classic article on *Culture Shock*. He postulated a generalized “honeymoon-crisis-recovery-adjustment model” and termed culture shock an “occupational disease” that international travelers face, complete with symptoms (e.g., feeling of helplessness, home-sickness, irritability, etc.).

Development of “Stages” Models

Within a few years, these rather vague stages became more codified and rigid. Adaptation development models linked to discrete stages began with the concept of a “U-curve” by Lysgaard, who in 1955, described moving from a “honeymoon” period into culture shock and on to recovery and adjustment. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) expanded the U-curve, proposing the “W” in which they conceptualized the model as having two connected U-periods (or a “W” shape) that linked the phenomenon of initial entry culture shock with reverse culture shock. For years, general assumptions about the models held that they reflected the most common patterns of adjustment, could be applied to most sojourners, generally occurred over fixed time periods (e.g., crisis at 3-6 months), and were backed by research. But there were always skeptics.

Subsequently, many trainers (e.g., Stephen H. Rhinesmith) and theoreticians developed elaborations or variations on the models to deal with what they considered simplistic, reductionistic, or overly deterministic aspects of the original conceptions. A few early critics suggested alternative models: Peter Adler (1975) proposed a model of “contact-disintegration-reintegration-autonomy-independence” in his article *The Transitional Experience*; Janet Bennett’s (1977) article, *Transition Shock*, proposed that culture shock is but a variation and subset of reactions caused by significant

change across a broad spectrum of circumstances. Whatever reservations and concerns academics and trainers might have had with the “curves” were completely offset by its clear, easy-to-understand stages, and they became the dominant models for training related to culture shock for almost a quarter century.

Research Challenges “Curves” Models

Many trainers who used the curves models noted that whatever its heuristic value was, the curves were seldom replicated (exactly or even approximately) in the real life experiences of their students. Neither were they useful as predictors of the depth, length, or even occurrence of culture shock. The culture shock was real enough, but the models turned out to be neither accurately descriptive nor particularly predictive. The models, as they stood, did not capture either the apparent “messiness” and unpredictability of the process, nor did they account for cases where it appeared that the stages did not occur in order, were frequently repeated, seemed compressed or blended, or were absent altogether.

Two publications severely critical of the “curves” approach were those authored by Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham (2001), and Kate Berardo (2006). Ward et al. provide a superb research review of the impact of culture shock upon education abroad students and international student adaptation as part of *The Psychology of Culture Shock, 2nd Ed.*, and they reiterate Ward’s earlier conclusion: “The U-curve has been on trial now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected.” (Ward 1998, 290). Kate Berardo’s MA thesis, *The U-Curve of Adjustment: A Study in the Evolution and Evaluation of a 50-year old Model*, is an exhaustive review of a half-century of research on the validity of the “curves” and, like Ward, recommends that practitioners cease using the models, at least with the certainty and authority they are often presented in training. These sources offer an extended and fine-grained analysis of the research on “curves of adjustment,” and I refer the reader to them both for supporting documentation and a review of the arguments against continuing to use the “curves” uncritically. There is enough data to conclude that, however beloved the curves and accompanying graphics are, their use should be restricted and highly qualified in the future.

The Future?

I personally used the “curves of adjustment” for almost three decades—in spite of my own experience that for many of my students the models did not fit their experience particularly well, either going abroad or coming home. However, that said, I might use a “curve” graphic in the future as a simple pedagogical device to discuss the issue of culture shock and responses to it, but I will not do so unless I also provide *at a minimum* the qualifying information that:

- There is a lack of supporting research for the validity of the U- and W-curves; the “curves” have been dismissed by many theorists.
- The “curves” do not reflect a universal reality; there is a high degree of variability among individual responses exhibited by any group of sojourners (i.e., they are not predictive for any one individual).
- There are a variety of possible alternative patterns that have been documented in studies, thus the current “curves” may not reflect one’s experience.
- There is significant variability across phases, particularly in the initial period of euphoria upon entering another culture, and in the duration of reverse culture shock upon reentry.
- There is a limited applicability of the models to all categories of sojourners: it does not fit the global nomads and third culture kids (TCKs) very well, nor does it fit ‘heritage-seeking’ students or education abroad populations from refugee/immigrant backgrounds.

I have no idea what will eventually replace the “curves of adjustment,” but whatever it is, it will have to address:

1. the obvious diversity of students who go abroad (and come here) to study,
2. in cultures profoundly different than their own,
3. who will encounter an amazing range of circumstances and situations,
4. to which they will have an equally diverse set of reactions, and
5. we, as educators, will have to help them make some sense and meaning out of all this—for their sakes and ours.

Students continue to need our counsel and advice on how to get the most out of their international education experience and the best ways to avoid the more serious manifestations of culture shock. But it seems that we might need to do it without the increasingly dubious assistance of using the “curves” as our models of how to conceptualize and prepare as we approach a transition.

- *Bruce La Brack*

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