



3-1-2003

Culture Shock Due to Contact with Unfamiliar Cultures

Stephen Bochner

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, S.Bochner@unsw.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Bochner, S. (2003). Culture Shock Due to Contact with Unfamiliar Cultures. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 8(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1073>

Culture Shock Due to Contact with Unfamiliar Cultures

Abstract

The topic of this chapter is the social psychology of cross-cultural interaction. We discuss the psychological processes that take place during and after meetings between individuals and groups who differ in their cultural backgrounds. We identify two types of cross-cultural contact: a) meetings that occur between two societies when individuals travel from their place of origin to another country for a specific purpose and a limited amount of time, such people being called *sojourners* in the literature; and b) meetings within multi-cultural societies among its ethnically diverse permanent residents. Contact with culturally unfamiliar people and places can be unsettling, and the term "culture shock" is frequently used to describe how people react to novel or unaccustomed situations. Although the unknown can be terrifying, we nevertheless argue that "culture shock" is not inevitable, or for that matter as widespread as is often suggested. Indeed, in many circumstances culture contact can be a satisfying experience. We draw on the ABC model of culture contact to provide a framework for the discussion, that is, we distinguish between the **A**ffective, **B**ehavioural and **C**ognitive components of cross-cultural interaction. In the chapter we describe the conditions that determine whether the contact will have positive or adverse consequences, and the psychological techniques that can be deployed to increase cross-cultural understanding among the individuals, groups and societies in contact.

Introduction

Most of us live and work in familiar surroundings, usually in places where we grew up or like those where we were raised. And by and large the people whom we meet at work, school or play tend to be similar to ourselves, in the sense of having comparable ethnic backgrounds, matching beliefs, shared values, and speak the same language or at least a dialect variant of it. Technically, this can be called inhabiting a culturally homogeneous space.

Although living in accustomed circumstances is the rule for most people, there have always been exceptions to this pattern. The history of humankind is full of examples of persons and groups who travelled to foreign lands for a variety of purposes, the main ones being to work, study, teach, conquer, assist, have fun in, or settle in the country. The journals of Captain Cook, Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus provide very good descriptions of what we have referred to elsewhere (e.g. Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) as **between-society** culture contact. Modern day examples include employees of international organisations, guest workers, overseas students, tourists, immigrants, refugees, missionaries, and peacekeepers.

Between-Society Contact

The term **between society culture-contact** refers to individuals who travel beyond their countries of origin for a particular purpose and for a specified period of time, and the relationships they establish with members of the host society. The term **sojourner** has been used to describe such culture travellers, indicating that they are temporary visitors intending to return home after achieving their aims. And the term **host-society member** is often employed to distinguish the visitors from the visited. Travelling between societies inevitably involves some personal contact between culturally dissimilar individuals, and in the case of the sojourner, exposure to unaccustomed physical and social manifestations. This can be unsettling, particularly if the transition is abrupt, and is the origin of the concept of "culture shock", the subject of this chapter.

Within-Society Contact

The term **within-society contact** describes inter-ethnic relationships in multi-cultural societies. Successful multi-cultural countries may contain many diverse ethnic groups integrated by institutional arrangements that support shared values and produce a common sense of nationhood. The United States from its earliest days was characterised by a great deal of internal diversity. In such social systems people will inevitably meet others who are dissimilar to themselves in appearance, ancestry, values and customs. In countries that favour ethnic diversity, such cross-cultural contact enriches the lives of its citizens. The opposite is the case in countries where inter-group relations have an ethnocentric bias.

Between-Society Culture Shock

During the last 40 years, the incidence of humans shifting across national boundaries has greatly increased. Reasons include the invention of the jumbo jet that made international travel quicker, easier and cheaper. Changes in the world economy have also played their part. The term "**globalisation**" is much in the news nowadays, and relates not only to industry and commerce, but also to education and leisure. For example, in 1999 overseas assignments by United States companies exceeded 350,000 business persons, a figure that does not take into account all the other nations sending their executives abroad. It has been estimated that at any given time there are about a million and a half students and scholars attending educational institutions abroad. The figures for tourists are even greater: The World Tourism Organisation has projected that by the year 2010 the number of international tourist-related journeys will rise to a total of 940 million trips per year.

Natural and human-made disasters such as floods, famine and regional conflicts also play a major role in stimulating cross-cultural travel, and include growing numbers of refugees, immigrants and guest workers. However, people in these categories do not fit our definition of a sojourner as most of them do not intend to or are unable to return to their countries of origin. Consequently, their reactions are more appropriately considered from the perspective of within-society culture contact.

The phrase **culture shock** has been attributed to the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg, who in an article in 1960 used it to illustrate how people react to strange or unfamiliar places. In our book (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001) we have suggested that readers should be cautious about taking the expression too literally. There is no doubt that it reflects some of the feelings and experiences of travellers who suddenly find themselves in new, strange, or unfamiliar places. The unknown can be an uncomfortable and at times terrifying experience. However, the use of the word "shock" places too much emphasis on the threatening circumstances of contact with novel situations, without acknowledging that such experiences may also have beneficial consequences for the participants. This led us to contend that over the years "culture shock" has become a widely misused term, both in popular language as well as in cross-cultural psychology. This article will identify some of the empirical conditions under which travel across cultures can be stressful, offer a theoretical explanation for such an outcome, and provide a brief account of the strategies that can be used to reduce contact-induced stress. As such, we will restrict ourselves to the "culture shock" of **between-society** culture contact, that is, the psychology of the traveller or sojourner who ventures across cultures. Other articles in this series deal with immigrant and refugee experiences, or the psychology of acculturation that characterises **within-society** culture contact.

Readers may question why we have included tourists in the discussion of culture shock. That is because although tourism is promoted as a tranquil and relaxing holiday experience, many studies have shown that tourists are prone to exactly the same psychological stress as other between-culture travelers.

The Determinants of Culture Shock

The Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis

A robust finding in social psychological research is that individuals have a preference for people who are similar to themselves; and are less favourably disposed to others regarded as being different. Similarity is a complex matter, because individuals and groups can be alike in a variety of ways. Even so, studies have found that most non-trivial aspects of similarity have an effect on how people will respond to and perceive each other. In general, individuals are more likely to seek out, enjoy, understand, want to work and play with, trust, vote for, and marry others with whom they share characteristics they regard as important. These include values, religion, group affiliation, skills, physical attributes, age, language, occupation, social class, nationality, ethnicity, residential location, and most other aspects on which human beings differ.

It should be emphasised that we are addressing *perceived* rather than *actual* similarity, which is inferred, sometimes quite erroneously, from characteristics such as skin colour, accent, clothing, and other visible cues. To cite a personal example, some years ago we were visiting a stately home in Britain, and encountered a middle aged man attired in a scruffy outfit engaged in pruning a rose bush. We assumed that this person was one of the many gardeners employed by the estate, until we observed a similarly-attired workman approach the man, deferentially doff his cap, and address the person as "My Lord". Many intercultural encounters are marred by such fallacious inferences.

The technical term for preferring like-minded people is *in-group bias*. The theory underlying it is based on the principle that the similarity of another person is reassuring. The world is a complex place with many choices and alternatives to offer. It is frequently unclear as to how people should behave in social situations that are often ambiguous. Such uncertainty can be unpleasant, and actors will seek guidance about how to "correctly" conduct themselves. Books and magazines on etiquette provide one source of advice, as does religious doctrine for the devout. However, a more common solution is to ascertain how other people deal with the problem, the technical term for this process being *consensual validation*. Individuals with similar values and practices provide confirmation that our opinions, actions and decisions are righteous and correct. And conversely, a dissimilar person may undermine such security.

Although the term "culture" has been defined in a variety of ways, common to all of them is the principle of culture as *shared meanings*. It follows from this definition that contact between culturally diverse people will take place among individuals who are dissimilar, quite possibly with respect to important, deeply felt issues. A further implication is that such interactions may be aversive and cause "culture shock", that is, create anxiety, and in extreme cases fear and loathing in the participants.

The Culture-Distance Hypothesis

Research, much of it reviewed in our book, has shown that the greater the cultural distance separating interacting participants, the more difficulty they will have in

establishing and maintaining harmonious relations. This effect has been found for most sojourners including tourists, overseas students and expatriate business persons, all of whom perform less effectively in their personal and professional lives in cultures that are significantly different from their own. Importantly, the distance between the cultures of the participants will have an effect on the smoothness of the interaction. For instance, Australian sojourners in Britain should have an easier time of it than is the case for Australian sojourners in Mainland China. "Culture shock" defined in this way is a function of the degree of separation between the cultures of the sojourners and their host societies.

Differences in Core Values

A special case of culture distance derives from differences in values, and can be another major source of culture shock. Interactions between members of societies diametrically opposed on core issues can quickly descend into rancor and hostility. For instance, the lower standing of women in some societies attracts condemnation in cultures that value non-discriminatory gender relations. Conversely, members of male-dominated societies regard the occupational and sexual independence of Western women as repugnant and offensive. Probably the single most potent source of friction stems from differences in religious beliefs and practices, as many historical as well as contemporary examples illustrate.

Outcomes of Culture Shock

In this section we review some of the psychological effects of exposure to culture contact. We will be suggesting that contact does not necessarily lead to negative reactions. However, there is no doubt that cross-cultural interactions are inherently stressful, and an analysis of any potential adverse reactions must be included in the discussion.

Culture-Shock Research in Historical Perspective

The bulk of past research was conducted from the perspective of culture contact as a one-way flow of influence. That is, most studies set out to describe the impact of the new culture on the sojourners. The term typically used in this context was "adjustment", implying that sojourners had to accommodate to the host culture or suffer the consequences. Until quite recently any reciprocal effects of the visitor on the host country tended to be ignored. This was because it was assumed that a host society is too monolithic to be significantly touched by such temporary residents. The exception to this trend were studies of the impact of tourists on the sites and cultures they visit, but even here this was mainly with respect to their economic consequences. We will not be able to discuss this issue further as it would take us beyond our immediate focus, but readers should be reminded that the sojourner-host member relationship is very much a reciprocal transaction, and that both parties can experience "culture shock".

The early sojourn literature was characterised by four features: First, it was assumed that culture contact is a noxious, or at least a painful experience for the sojourner. Second,

flowing from the belief that cross-cultural contact is inherently unpleasant, most of the researchers conceptualised the outcome of contact predominantly in affective terms, concentrating on the negative emotions, fears and anxieties that sojourners supposedly experienced.

Third, this in turn gave the field a distinctly "clinical", intra-individual flavour, particularly when it came to accounting for individual differences in adjustment and coping. Personality traits such as "tolerance for ambiguity", "authoritarianism" and "neuroticism" were used to explain why some culture travellers failed and others succeeded. One consequence of this approach was to stigmatise those who "broke down". The many Peace Corps Volunteers in the early days who had to be repatriated because they could not cope are a good example.

Fourth, most of the research was basically a-theoretical, consisting of shotgun surveys of various samples of convenience, which meant that the results were difficult to interpret.

Contemporary studies of "culture shock" tend to be much more theoretically driven, look at social as well as internal determinants, and allow for the measurement of both positive as well as negative outcomes.

The ABC of Culture Shock

In our book, we have developed what we called the ABC theory of culture contact. Unlike earlier formulations, the ABC model does not regard the response to unfamiliar cultural settings as a passive, largely negative reaction, but rather as an active process of dealing with change. The term ***coping behavior*** is sometimes used in the literature to emphasize this active aspect. Additionally, the model makes an explicit distinction between three components of this process: **A**ffect, **B**ehavior, and **C**ognitions; that is, how people feel, behave, think and perceive when exposed to second-culture influences. The ABC model also links each of these elements to particular theoretical frameworks. Finally, the model has implications for interventions aimed at decreasing "culture shock" and increasing the likelihood of achieving positive culture-contact outcomes.

The ***affective*** approach to culture contact is captured by Oberg's depiction of 'culture shock' as a buzzing confusion. To be fair, he had in mind people who were suddenly exposed to a completely unfamiliar setting and overwhelmed by it, a phenomenon particular to the jet age. Nevertheless, it became fashionable to characterise all culture contact in terms of negative affect, such as confusion, anxiety, disorientation, suspicion, even grief and bereavement due to a sense of loss of familiar physical objects and social relationships.

More recent formulations of the affective component in inter-cultural contact draw on the stress and coping literature (reviewed in our book), which treats socio-cultural adjustment as an active, adaptive response. Self-efficacy as described by Bandura (1986) has also been a prominent feature of this approach.

The intervention techniques implied by the affective model tend to be variants of traditional counselling procedures, their aim being to reduce anxiety, increase self-efficacy and emotional resilience, and to develop effective coping strategies.

During the 70' and 80' it became obvious, at least to some of us, that culture contact did not always lead to culture shock. Some sojourners seemed to thrive in what were for them exotic locations. And it was also apparent, at least to those of us trained as social psychologists, that culture contact was manifestly an interpersonal, interactive event. Intra-personal characteristics and traits certainly played a role, but that was really only one part of the story, and a minor one at that. The present writer spent some time at Oxford with Michael Argyle, and was greatly impressed by his (Argyle, 1994) model of interpersonal behavior as a mutually skilled performance. Specifically, Argyle said that social interaction is a highly rule-bound activity, even though the participants are mostly unaware of this underlying framework. The guidelines that control social behavior are largely taken for granted, rather like the presence of oxygen in the air. Only when the oxygen is reduced or missing, as in smog or carbon dioxide emissions, do we take notice of it. And the same is true in our social world, we really only become aware of the presence of a behavioral imperative when it is infringed or disregarded.

Although at that time Argyle was constructing his social skills model without explicit reference to any cross-cultural implications, its utility in explaining culture-contact phenomena was obvious to the writer, leading him to develop what he called a culture-learning model of contact. In this he was assisted by two books by E. T. Hall (1959, 1966) that did take a transcultural view – *The silent language* and *The hidden dimension*. The culture learning model extends Argyle's social skills account to propose that the rules, conventions and assumptions that regulate interpersonal interaction, particularly verbal and non-verbal communication, vary across cultures. One implication is that sojourners who lack culturally relevant social skills and knowledge will have difficulty in initiating and sustaining harmonious relations with their hosts, or in the case of immigrants, with mainstream members. Their culturally inappropriate behavior will lead to misunderstandings and may cause offense. Indeed, research has shown that culturally unskilled persons are less likely to achieve their professional and personal goals. Expatriate executives may alienate their local counterparts and lose market share, overseas students may fail their courses, hospitality industry workers may offend tourists, and the job prospects of migrants may be adversely affected.

All of the above effects have been confirmed empirically. The present writer has conducted numerous studies of the social networks of various groups of sojourners to confirm that poor social skills have adverse effects, exacerbated by the extent of the distance separating host from visitor (or majority from minority) cultures. A critical factor in sojourner adjustment was the extent to which they had host-culture friends, the reason being that these persons acted as informal culture-skills mentors. Those visitors who socialised exclusively with members of their own cultures did less well on a variety of measures than sojourners who had established non-trivial links with their hosts. The relevant empirical literature has been comprehensively reviewed in our recent book.

The culture learning approach emphasises the behavioral elements of culture contact. It is equally relevant in explaining encounters within as well as between cultures, and it is interactive rather than just concentrating on the visitor or newcomer. It has clear implications for remedial action: For individuals to function effectively in a second-culture setting, they have to acquire relevant skills and knowledge specific to the new culture; that is, they have to learn about the historical, philosophical and sociopolitical foundations of the target society, and acquire and rehearse some of the associated behaviors. This approach does not stigmatise those who stumble in their second-culture interactions, because the reason for their failure lies not in their personalities, but in their competencies. And it is a lot easier to learn new skills than it is to change personalities.

The third element of the model is the **cognitive** component, and owes its place in the theory to what has been called the cognitive revolution in psychology, that is, to the greater emphasis during the last ten or so years on cognitive processes. Again, we have taken developments within "mainstream" monocultural psychology and extended them to culture contact issues. As mentioned earlier, the broadest definition of culture is as a system of shared meanings, very much a cognitive proposition.

People interpret physical, interpersonal, institutional, existential and spiritual events as cultural manifestations, and these vary across cultures. When different cultures come into contact, particularly 'distant' ones, such established truths lose their apparent certainty. For instance, when persons from a society that values individualism, as is the case in most Western countries, sojourn in a collectivist culture such as Japan, the conflict between these two orientations will drift into the cognitions of both visitors and hosts. It will affect how the participants see each other and themselves, and whether either party will change their views as a consequence of the contact. Relevant theoretical models and research topics include attribution theory, prejudice, ethnocentrism and stereotypes, and social identity theory.

Interventions based on the cognitive component of culture contact involve some form of cultural sensitivity and awareness training. These techniques emphasise the cultural relativity of most values, the validity of the unfamiliar culture, and more generally the advantages of cultural diversity, including the commercial, aesthetic, and adaptive advantages of a culturally heterogeneous global system.

Measuring Culture Shock

In the final analysis the As, Bs, and Cs of culture contact are defined operationally in terms of the constructs and procedures used to measure them. Some typical measures of B and C (**behavior** and **cognition**) include Colleen Ward's Sociocultural Adjustment Scale, Kelley & Meyers Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory, and the Social Situations Questionnaire that Adrian Furnham and Stephen Bochner developed to measure the extent to which sojourners experience difficulties in their new settings (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

The **behavioral** dimension is sometimes further divided into three sub-categories: **Instrumental Adjustment**, defined as the ability to navigate through the new environment. Examples of items include "I know where to shop for what I need." **Interaction**

Adjustment, defined as casual interactions with host members "When I experienced unsatisfactory service, I did something about it; I have no difficulty in asking strangers for directions". And **Relational Adjustment**, defined as maintaining non-trivial friendships and social networks with host members "I made friends with people of different ethnic backgrounds." We have also developed a scale that measures **Host-Language Proficiency**, found to be a good index of behavioral adjustment.

The **cognitive** dimension can also be regarded as having three distinct components: **Interest in Other Cultures** "When I meet people different from me, I want to learn more about them"; **Tolerance for Cultural Differences** "When I meet people from other cultures I tend to feel judgmental about their differences"; and **Positive Attitudes Toward New or Unusual Cultural Environments** "I believe I can live a fulfilling life in another culture".

Over the years, the author has been measuring the cognitive dimension of **ethnic or cultural identity** with the **I Am Test**, which consists of a sheet of paper listing ten incomplete statements beginning with "I am...". This measure is sensitive to whether participants are mono-cultural with respect to their new or original culture, marginal with respect to both, or bi-cultural or culturally hyphenated individuals (e.g. Chinese-Australians). The procedure has its theoretical basis in Stephen Bochner's (1981) **Mediating-Person** Model. We also sometimes use a one-item test in which we simply ask people to write down what ethnic group they belong to. Colleen Ward and her colleagues have explored identity by conventional questionnaire items that measure how individuals perceive and relate to their own cultural groups and to members of other groups.

Affective Adjustment is usually measured by means of scales adapted from the clinical literature to gauge the amount of stress and physical and mental ill health the sojourners experience, or in positive terms, the extent of emotional well-being and satisfaction. Sub-scales include measures of anxiety, confusion, low self-esteem, homesickness, and a sense of helplessness. Subjective estimates of health are also often included, using questionnaires such as the General Health Questionnaire.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by commenting about the relationship between the **A**, **B**, and **C** elements of the model. In our book we regard each of the components as influencing and being influenced by the other two elements. Technically, this can be described as a continuous feedback cycle reverberating among the three components. In other words, what we feel will affect what we do and think, and vice versa cubed. And because there is no direct research regarding the relative importance of these three processes, the **A**, **B**, and **C** components have been accorded equal status by default. However I tend to the view, which is not necessarily shared by my co-authors, that the primary determinants of culture shock as a negative reaction, and cross-cultural adaptation as a positive response, are in the behavioral domain. I believe that affective (emotional) responses are essentially retrospective evaluations of inter-cultural experiences, that is, behavioral episodes, which can range from the aversive to the highly satisfactory. And I assume that the main function of cognitive responses is to rationalise these emotive reactions. If these speculations can

be supported by empirical evidence, this has implications for intervening in and managing inter-cultural contacts, in particular that more weight should be given to facilitating the culture learning of the participants.

References

- Argyle, M. (1994). *The psychology of interpersonal behaviour*. (5th ed.). London, UK: Penguin.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social-cognitive view*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bochner, S. (Ed.) (1981). *The mediating person: Bridges between cultures*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1986). (Reprinted 1989, 1990, 1994). *Culture shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock* (2nd ed.). Hove, UK: Routledge.

About the Author

Stephen Bochner is a Visiting Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. He is a cross-cultural applied psychologist, with a special interest in the psychology of culture contact and acculturation. He is the author of several books, and numerous chapters in books and journal articles. Topics on which he has published extensively include the adaptation of overseas students and expatriates, and the social psychology of culturally diverse work places. His most recent publications are as co-author with Colleen Ward and Adrian Furnham of the book "The psychology of culture shock: Second edition" published in 2001 by Routledge; and "Organisational culture and climate", a chapter in the forthcoming book "Organisational psychology in Australia and New Zealand", edited by M. O'Driscoll, P Taylor & T. Kalliath to be published by Oxford University Press in 2003.

E-mail address: s.bochner@unsw.edu.au

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is it easier to communicate with individuals who are similar to you than with people who are different?
2. Canadian students enrolled in a university in the United States are probably going to make the transition more easily than if they were attending one of the universities in Hong Kong that use English as the medium of instruction. What are some of the reasons for these differences in coping?

3. What would be a useful working definition of culture?
4. Adapting to new cultural settings involves changes in the way in which sojourners feel, behave, and think. If you have had personal exposure to unfamiliar cultures, reflect on your experiences and share these with your colleagues, using the A, B, and C categories as a framework for your account.
5. What do you believe is an effective way to prepare people for living and working in unfamiliar cultural settings? Again, use the A, B, C framework to organise your suggestions.