EXPLORING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

By BILL HOFFA

A. GENERAL

It is very hard to know what life is really like in a country or region whose culture one has never experienced directly. But it is very easy to have the illusion of knowing what it will be like—from images furnished by popular communications media, from reading, or perhaps having met a few people from 'there,' here on home ground. Simply 'knowing about' another culture, however, is not the same thing as knowing what it will feel like to be learning and living there, on its terms. Every culture has distinct characteristics that make it different from every other culture. Some differences are quite evident, even to the unsophisticated (e.g. language, religion, political organization, etc.). Others can be so subtle that while foreign visitors may be vaguely aware of them, making adjustments is a complex process and one may remain uncomfortable and off balance for quite some time.

One of the difficulties students and other travelers have in adjusting to foreign life comes about because they take abroad with them too much of their own 'cultural baggage': misleading stereotypes and preconceptions about others, coupled with a lack of awareness of that part of themselves which was formed by U.S. culture alone. As a result, suddenly feeling like a fish out of water is a not uncommon experience. It is in fact something which should be anticipated as normal and likely, at least for a while.

According to Robert Kohls, formerly the Director of Training and Development for the United States Information Agency, "Culture is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society, ...the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes--its customs, language, material artifacts and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation." It is not identical with the genetic heritage that may differentiate one group of people from another. These differences in shared systems of attitudes and feelings is one of those more subtle areas of difference that foreigners experience when they leave 'home.'

B. CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Numerous studies have been done to identify specific characteristics that distinguish one culture from another. This anthropological approach to cultural differences and similarities of course can and should be studied. Most overseas visitors and those who receive them, however, often unfortunately are captured by misleading and often dangerous stereotyping. Most Germans, Japanese, Italians, etc., have stereotyped perceptions of 'the American,' just as most Americans have stereotyped images of 'Germans,' 'Japanese,' 'Italians,' etc. In short, misperceptions may exist on all sides. Frequently, the stereotype of the American is far from complimentary: the boorish tourist who expects everyone to speak English, the arrogant patriot who thinks every country in the world should pattern itself after the United States, the drunken reveler who sees the anonymity of traveling abroad as an opportunity to drop all civilized inhibitions--all have contributed to the development of this unfortunate stereotype. It is up to you to behave in a manner that will convince your hosts that this is indeed an unjustified stereotype that cannot be applied arbitrarily, at least to yourself.

It may seem a bit contradictory to suggest that because of the unique social and cultural milieu in the United States, most Americans tend to be less reserved, less inhibited, and less restrained in their efforts to communicate friendliness and sociability. But in some areas abroad this outgoing manner, especially on the part of young women, can be grossly misinterpreted: a friendly smile and a warm "hello" on the streets of Rome could easily be interpreted by an Italian Lothario as something more than mere friendliness. This is to say that until you develop a feel for the social customs characteristics of the area where you are living and studying, it is wise to be more formal and restrained in your social contacts. By the same token, do not expect the local populace to welcome you immediately, with open arms; their formality and restraint are not necessarily an expression of unfriendliness but may simply be characteristic of their social manner with strangers.

Unfortunately, attempts to categorize cultural characteristics often end up in cultural stereotypes that are unfair and misleading. In adjusting to your study abroad environment, you will therefore have to deal not only with real cultural differences, and also with perceived cultural differences. Keep in mind that people of other cultures are just as adept at stereotyping the American as we are at stereotyping them—and the results are not always complimentary. The following are a few examples of the qualities (some positive, some negative) that others frequently associate with the "typical" American:

- outgoing and friendly
- informal
- loud, rude, boastful,
- immature
- hard working
- extravagant and wasteful
- sure they have all the answers
- lacking in class consciousness-disrespectful of authority
- racially prejudiced
- ignorant of other countries
- wealthy
- generous
- promiscuous
- always in a hurry

While a stereotype might possess some grain of truth, it is obvious when we consider individual differences that not every American fits the above description. The same is true about your hosts vis-à-vis your own preconceptions, for example, about the Germans, the English, the Japanese, the Italians, the Spaniards, the Russians, etc.

**C. CULTURE SHOCK**

Many travelers go through an initial period of euphoria and excitement, overwhelmed by the thrill of being in a totally new and unusual environment. As this initial sense of "adventure" wears off, they gradually become aware of the fact that old habits and routine ways of doing things no longer suffice. They gradually (or suddenly) no longer feel comfortably themselves. If this happens to you, as it is likely to, you will feel like the outsider you in fact are. Minor problems may quickly assume the proportions of major crises, and you may find yourself growing somewhat depressed. You may feel an anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, a kind of psychological disorientation. You will indeed be experiencing what has come to be referred to as
"Culture Shock". Such feelings are perfectly normal, so, knowing this and with a bit of conscious effort, you will soon find yourself making adjustments (some quite subtle and perhaps not even noticeable at the conscious level) that will enable you to adapt to your new cultural environment.

There is no clear-cut way of dealing with culture shock. Simply recognizing its existence and your accepting vulnerability to it is an important first step. As long as you know in advance that you will probably fall victim to culture shock at a certain level, you can prepare yourself psychologically to accept the temporary discomfort and turn it into an advantage by learning from it. Remember that you are not the only one experiencing occasional frustration, irritability, and depression, etc. Falling victim to culture shock, in other words, does not imply the existence of any psychological or emotional shortcomings on your part. As Robert Kohls says, "Culture shock is in some degree inevitable... and is the occupational hazard of overseas living through which one has to be willing to go through in order to enjoy the pleasures of experiencing other countries and cultures in depth."

Undergoing culture shock is in itself a learning experience that you should take advantage of. It is a way of sensitizing you to another culture at a level that goes beyond the intellectual and the rational. Just as an athlete cannot get in shape without going through the uncomfortable conditioning stage, so you cannot fully appreciate the cultural differences that exist without first going through the uncomfortable stages of psychological adjustment.

D. FITTING IN

Social customs differ greatly from one country to another. It is therefore impossible to give guidelines that will be applicable in every culture. Generally speaking, you can be yourself as long as you remain friendly, courteous, and dignified. Always keep in mind that you are the guest in someone else's country. Therefore, you would be safe to assume that your behavior should be regulated pretty much in the same manner as if you were the guest in someone else's home. On the other hand, as an outsider, especially if you err on the side of being respectful, some allowances are likely to exist for the things you do not immediately understand or feel comfortable with.

POLITENESS: In keeping with the relatively formal manner of social customs abroad, you should place much more emphasis on the simple niceties of polite social intercourse than you might at home. Be prepared to offer a formal word of greeting to whomever you meet in your day-to-day activities. For example, should you approach a clerk in the local market in Strasbourg always be courteous enough to begin your conversation with, "Bonjour, Madame (Monsieur, Mademoiselle)" before you launch into your inquiries about the products, and become familiar with the appropriate expressions of gratitude in response to your hosts' hospitality.

HUMOR: While each country has its own particular brand of wit and humor, very few cultures appreciate the kind of "kidding" that which Americans are accustomed. Comments, even when intended to be humorous, can often be taken quite literally.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE: When it comes to language, most people will be extremely flattered rather than amused at your efforts to communicate in their native language. Do not be intimidated or inhibited when practicing your own limited command of the language. A couple of words of caution might be in order: do your best to avoid slang expressions, which are usually unique to the particular culture, and which may therefore be totally meaningless or inappropriate in the context of another culture. Be aware of the differences between the "familiar" and the "polite" forms of address and be sure to use them properly.

Do not try to translate American idiomatic expressions direct into the native language. Idioms as a whole may be complete nonsense when translated into another language. While it is not true that
all people speak English, it is true enough for you to be wary of making impolite or tactless comments on the presumption that those within hearing distance will not understand what you are saying.

**PHYSICAL CONTACT:** When establishing social relationships, "play it by ear" in determining the level of familiarity that you should adopt at the various stages of your relationship. Physical contact, for example, may not be especially appreciated or understood by someone unfamiliar with the American idea of camaraderie; a cheerful pat on the back or a warm hug may be quite embarrassing and uncomfortable in certain cultures.

All cultures have different notions about social space, for instance how far away to stand or sit when conversing, or how to shake hands or wave farewell. Restraint is advisable until you learn how the locals do it and what they expect of you.

**PERSONAL QUESTIONS:** Let your hosts point the way when engaging in "small talk." While Americans may find it easy and quite appropriate to talk about themselves, in some countries, your hosts may view this as being as impolite as asking personal questions of them.

**DRINKING AND DRUNKENNESS:** Be extremely sensitive of others' attitudes and feelings when it comes to drinking. You will probably find that your hosts enjoy social drinking as much as any American, but they might not look upon drunkenness as either amusing or indeed tolerable. Know the law, local customs, and your limits.

**PRICE BARGAINING:** Haggling over prices can be another sensitive and vague subject. Haggling is not only appropriate but even expected in some circumstances. The trick is to know under which circumstances haggling is appropriate. Unless you clearly understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate circumstances for this sort of social bargaining, you may very well find yourself insulting the merchant and further reinforcing a negative stereotype of Americans. You can always test the waters by politely indicating that you like the product very much but that it is a bit more than you had anticipated spending; if the merchant wishes to bargain further, this will give him the opening he needs to offer you the product at a lower price; if it is not that kind of an establishment, you can simply (and politely) terminate the conversation.

**TALKING POLITICS:** Expect people abroad to be very articulate and well-informed when it comes to matters of politics and international relations. Do not be at all surprised if your counterparts try to engage you in political debate. There is certainly no reason for you to modify your own convictions, but you should be discreet and rational in your defense of those convictions. Here again you may very well find yourself butting heads with another of those unfortunate stereotypes, such as the arrogant American who thinks everyone must fall in line with the United States.

**PHOTOGRAPH ETIQUETTE:** You may want to record many of your memories on film, and it is often convenient to include some of the local populace in your photographs. However, remember that the people you 'shoot' are human beings and not curiosity objects. Be tactful and discreet in how you approach photographing strangers; it is always courteous and wise to ask permission before taking someone's picture.

**SUMMARY:** Social customs differ from one country and culture to another, and there is simply no way you can fit in and be at home unless you learn what is and isn't appropriate behavior. It is impossible to make generalizations that can be applicable to every situation. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to inquire politely about local customs and social niceties. Expect things to be different overseas. One of the basic reasons for your participation in a study abroad program should necessarily be to develop a sensitivity to and appreciation for the people and customs of a totally
different culture and way of life. Anyone who goes overseas demanding that everything be the same as what (s)he is accustomed to in the United States will be sorely disappointed and probably better served by staying at home. Be flexible and receptive in dealing with these differences and you will find your own life experiences will be greatly enriched.

E. REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Just as you will have had to brace yourself for a period of psychological disorientation when you leave the USA, you should know that after your time abroad, you may also have to prepare yourself for a parallel period of readjustment when you return 'home.' Why? Simply because, if you have had a full experience living and learning overseas, you are likely to have changed some, while you have been away, so the place you return to may itself appear to have changed, as indeed it might have. Even though these changes are seldom huge, and may not be apparent to others, you are likely to be very aware of them, and this can be confusing, all the moreso because it is unexpected. Brigham Young University’s CultureGrams offer many insights on customs and lifestyles of individual countries. Phone 1-800-528-6279 or visit the website at http://www.culturgram.com/.

Immediately after your return, you can probably expect to go through an initial stage of euphoria and excitement. Most people are overwhelmed by the sheer joy of being back on their native turf. But as you try to settle back into your former routine, you may recognize that your overseas experience has changed some or many of your perceptions and assumptions, your ways of doing things, even what it means to 'be yourself.' You might have become, in a sense, a somewhat new person. After all, that is what education is all about! But this intellectual and personal growth means that you can expect a period of disorientation as you adjust to the "new" environment at home.

The re-adjustment period is usually rather short-lived, since 'home' will never be as "foreign" to you as the foreign environment you adjusted to overseas. Also, your experience of dealing successfully with culture shock abroad will have provided you with the psychological tools for dealing with the challenges of readjustment. Obviously, the more you have changed--often a by-product of the time you were away and how deeply you immersed yourself--the more difficult it will be to have things go back to a previous notion of normality. However, if you are aware of the changes (and seek to learn from them, smooth adaptation is more likely.)

As a means of readjusting and staying in touch with the international scene, you may want to consider contacting students who have been abroad, who are currently abroad, or who are thinking about going abroad. There are many ways of maintaining contact with friends you made overseas, foreign and domestic, and also of remaining in touch with the culture you entered and now have left--via letters, e-mail, phoning, magazines, books, etc. and other means. Discussing things and sharing experiences with others is almost always worthwhile. Remembering what it was like for you to have been, for a time, a 'foreigner' should inspire you to try to get to know the international students on your campus or others from 'minority' backgrounds, who may themselves be feeling some of the same social dislocation and alienation you once felt when you were overseas. The key is to build on the cross-cultural coping skills you now possess and to find conscious ways of integrating your new 'self' into your evolving personal and academic life, not seeing it as a 'dream' or something irrelevant to your future.

F. SPECIAL NOTE TO WOMEN

Some women students, in certain overseas (e.g. South America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe) have a hard time adjusting to attitudes they encounter abroad, in both public and private interactions between men and women. Some (but not all) men in such countries openly demonstrate their appraisal of women in ways that many American women find offensive. It is not
uncommon to be honked at, stared at, verbally and loudly appraised, and to be actively noticed simply for being an American woman. Sometimes the attention can be flattering. However, it may become very annoying, and potentially even angering. Indigenous women, who often get the same sort of treatment, have been taught how to ignore the attention. Many American women students find this hard to do. Eye contact between strangers or a smile at someone passing in the street, which is not uncommon in the States, may result in totally unexpected invitations. Some women feel they are forced to stare intently at the ground while they walk down the street.

You will have to learn what the unwritten rules are about what you can and cannot do abroad. Women can provide support for each other, and former students suggest that you get together several times early in your stay overseas to talk about what works and what doesn't for dealing with the unwanted attention. American women are seen as "liberated" in many ways, and sometimes the cultural misunderstandings that come out of this image can lead to difficult and unpleasant experiences.

Needless to say, this special and surprising status may make male-female friendships more difficult to develop. Be careful about the implicit messages you may be unintentionally communicating. Above all, try to maintain the perspective that these challenging (and sometimes difficult experiences) are part of the growth of cultural understanding which is one of the important reasons you are studying abroad. Prepare yourself by trying to understand in advance not only the gender roles and assumptions which may prevail elsewhere, but also the uniqueness of American gender politics, which may or may not be understood, much less prevail, in other countries.

Further Reading:

G. RACIAL AND ETHNIC CONCERNS:

No two students studying abroad ever have quite the same experience, even in the same program and country. This same variety is true for students of color and those from U.S. minority ethnic or racial backgrounds. Reports from past participants vary from those who felt exhilarated by being free of the American context of race relations, to those who experienced different degrees of 'innocent' curiosity about their ethnicity, to those who felt they met both familiar and new types of ostracism and prejudice and had to learn new coping strategies. Very few minority students conclude that racial or ethnic problems which can be encountered in other countries represent sufficient reasons for not going. On the other hand, they advise knowing what you are getting into and preparing yourself for it. Try to find others on your campus who have studied abroad and who can provide you with some counsel.

H. BEING GAY. LESBIAN, OR BISEXUAL ABROAD:

It is important to be aware of the laws pertaining to homosexuality in other countries, as well as the general attitudes of the populace toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of their community. The countries you visit may be more, or may be less, 'liberated' (on a general U.S. scale of values) in these regards, but will in all cases be at least somewhat unique. Moreover, whatever the general rule, there will always be pockets of difference and personal idiosyncracies. Country-specific information is often available from campus offices, personnel, and student groups. You should certainly talk with other students who have been where you will be.

For information on issues and resources pertaining to gay, lesbian, and bisexual travel, you also may want to consult publications available in some bookstores and libraries which carry such literature. For a comprehensive list of resources, including travel guides, web links, and other types of information for GLBT students, contact: http://www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay
Further Readings:

**THE ART OF CROSSING CULTURES.** Craig Storti. 1990. 136 pp. Intercultural Press. $15.95 (plus shipping)

**SURVIVAL KIT FOR OVERSEAS LEARNING: FOR AMERICANS PLANNING TO LIVE AND WORK ABROAD.** L. Robert Kohls, ed. 1996 (3rd ed) 181 pp. Intercultural Press. $11.95 (plus shipping)

**ON BEING FOREIGN: CULTURE SHOCK IN SHORT FICTION.** Edited by Tom Lewis and Robert Jungman. 1986. 293 pp. Intercultural Press. $17.95 (plus shipping)

**BACK IN THE USA: REFLECTING ON YOUR STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE AND PUTTING IT TO WORK.** Dawn Kepets. 1995. 34 pp. NAFSA. $5 (plus shipping)

**CROSS-CULTURAL REENTRY: A BOOK OF READINGS.** Clyde N. Austin. 1986. 284 pp. ACU Press. $14.95