



Culture shock

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What is it?

“Culture shock” is a feeling of disorientation and unease in a new and unfamiliar cultural environment as a result of relocation. This concept has both an affective, or psychological, component, relating to how an individual feels in their new surroundings, and a behavioural, or sociocultural, component, relating to how they interact with others from a different cultural background. Relocation triggers a cognitive response in individuals, who reflect on their own cultural identity and either reject or learn how to live by new cultural rules. An early model of culture shock, devised by Kalervo Oberg, identified set stages in a linear progression towards adjustment, but, while there may be common elements, such as learning a new language or coping with new norms or laws, the experience is now understood as different for each individual. Much depends on the domains that they frequent and the social roles that they play, ranging from an employee adjusting to new management practices at work, an accompanying spouse coping with daily life, to a student dealing with a new college and methods of study.

Who uses the concept?

Culture shock is widely used in the international business world, particularly in cross-cultural training for international relocation. The term is frequently used in Anthropology, Psychology and Communication and it is key to Migration Studies, a multidisciplinary field that studies all forms of human migration in different circumstances, whether forced, as in the case refugees and political asylum

seekers, for example, or voluntary, as in the case of business sojourners, tourists or international students. Culture shock, to some degree, is a likelihood for all migrants and travelers.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Addressing the stress and learning processes experienced in unfamiliar surroundings can help individuals to overcome a potentially negative experience and to engage positively in intercultural dialogue.

What work remains?

Studies in culture shock should take into account the discursive processes involved in social interaction and the power relations and macro forces that govern and influence life in specific contexts, experienced by individuals as a source of stress. Essentialist notions of culture based on national stereotypes or imagined communities of people across spuriously defined categories, as in, for example, “Asian culture” or “Islamic culture,” are insufficient categories of analysis, as an assumption of homogeneity in sociocultural behaviour across large populations neglects individual diversity and contextual dynamics.

Resources

- Fitzpatrick, F. (2017). Taking the ‘culture’ out of ‘culture shock.’ *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 13(4), 278-296.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock*. London: Routledge.