A Shocking Truth: Culture Shock Uncovered

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**Introduction**

Humans are born with the ability to create sounds synonymous with a large quantity of languages. As children grow, their ability to create sounds of other languages decreases as their ability for the language spoken in their home takes precedence above the others. Just like their language learning, children grow accustomed, and familiar, to the culture in which they are raised. They get a sense of the “do’s” and the “do not’s” of their society, and it is these “signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 2006, p. 1) that aid in explaining culture. As often happens, humans get attached to what they know and what lies inside of their comfort zone; take them out of that comfort zone, and one possibility is that the person will experience culture shock. “Culture shock,” a term coined by Kalervo Oberg, is a lot more complex than most people realize. Examples of culture shock can be found in the experiences of two young men, both of whom studied abroad in Germany for the period of a year. Both young men experience the culture and people differently, leading to the discussion of whether Oberg’s theory of culture shock is valid.

**Hypothesis**

Removing an individual from his or her comfort zone and placing him or her in a foreign culture (environment) causes the individual to experience one or more stages of culture shock; although, individuals do not necessarily have to go through all four stages of culture shock to experience it. good

**Literature Review and Theoretical Lens**

In 1954, Kalervo Oberg coined the term “culture shock” as part of his culture shock theory. In 2006, he began an article about culture shock with the sentence, “Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 2006, p. 1). In other words, culture shock stems from the insecurity that individuals feel when they are taken out of their comfort zone. Four distinct stages of culture shock are described by Oberg. The first stage, the honeymoon stage, states, “Most individuals are fascinated by the new” (Oberg, 2006, p. 1). During this time the visitor has not yet settled in and is interested by all of the new things around them. The second stage, the aggression and hostility stage, is “characterized by a hostile and aggressive attitude towards the host country. This hostility evidently grows out of the genuine difficulty which the visitor experiences in the process of adjustment” (Ober, 2006, p. 2). This attitude stems from problems that the visitor faces (problems communicating, problems with commute, etc.) to which the citizens of the host country appear largely indifferent. The third and fourth stages are similar, although separated by Oberg. The third stage, the acceptance stage, begins, “If the visitor succeeds in getting some knowledge of the language and begins to get around by [themselves],” in which case, “[They are] beginning to open the way into the new cultural environment” (Oberg, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, the individual begins to open up to the new cultural environment if they learn a portion of the language and learn to get around by themselves. During the third stage, the individual’s humor begins to assert itself again. Oberg summarizes the fourths stage, “In the fourth stage… [t]he visitor now accepts the customs of the country as just another way of living” (Oberg, 2006, p. 2). During the fourth stage, the complete acceptance stage, individuals have only minor grievances with the language and culture. The fourth stage is total acceptance of the culture and the citizens of the host country.

Two examples of culture shock are analyzed in this paper. The first is about a Chinese exchange student who spent nearly a year in Germany studying abroad. The student, Zhu, experienced three of the four stages of culture shock, not reaching the fourth stage. He stayed with a host family who volunteered to take him in for the year and attended a German school for the entirety of the year. The second example to be reviewed in this paper deals with a young man traveling to Germany as an exchange student shortly after his 16 birthday. Nick finds himself alone in a whole new world, surrounded by people who do not understand the issues he is going through. Over the course of a year, Nick is able to learn the language and make new, lifelong friends. He completes his adjustment by the end of the year and is sad to have to leave and travel back home.

**Examples:**

*Example 1: Zhu’s Culture Battle*

Zhu, a Chinese exchange student who studied abroad in Germany for a year, experienced three of the four stages of Oberg’s culture shock. At the beginning of his year abroad, Zhu was entranced by everything; at one point, Zhu asked his host brother, “Can I touch your hair? It looks really interesting,” to which his host brother skeptically agreed. For three months Zhu constantly asked about every new thing around. As the honeymoon phase began to fade, he became moody. He stopped talking to people at school and began to stay in his room except to come down for meals and to go to school. He was asking fewer questions out of interest, and he stopped attempting to learn the language. About six months into his year as an exchange student, Zhu became very aggressive and hostile towards those around him. His host family called a representative of the program he was with in Germany after Zhu yelled at his host brother, “I can’t stand it here! No one is willing to help and everyone just makes fun of me for trying to learn their ways, so I’m just going to stop trying.” The people at school were making fun of his limited knowledge of German and he was taking it personally. He was finding that he could not express himself in the way that he needed to, and was feeling like “he would never fit in.” To him, it appeared that no one cared if he was having difficulties with the language, or that he was having trouble commuting around the city. It was not until the end of the ninth month of his year abroad that Zhu began to open up again. He came downstairs to the breakfast table one morning and said, in German, to his host family, “I’m sorry for the way I have been acting. Can you help me learn the language as much as possible in the next two months?” From that point to the end of his exchange year, Zhu practiced German without worrying what others thought. He made friends in school and began to socialize more with those around him. Because he had finally become acclimated to the German culture, it was difficult for Zhu to leave when his exchange year was completed; however, he was relieved to return to his own culture and his own language.

*Example 2: A trip to Germany and back again*

In this example, Nick, an American exchange student who also studied abroad in Germany, experiences the second, third, and fourth stages of culture shock. Not having had any formal training in the German language, it was difficult for Nick to begin adjustment into the new environment. During the first three weeks, he found himself becoming very frustrated with his host family about trivial things, “They are just making it hard for me,” Nick told his family back home one evening via a skype conversation. His frustration stemmed from the problems he was having learning the language because no one would help him it seemed. Nick was also having trouble opening up to those around him. After the first month, Nick was settled with his permanent host family in Frankfurt, Germany. This marked the beginning of Nick’s transition as he began to open up to his surroundings. He was practicing his German, despite the mistakes he made, and his language learning progressed quickly. As his vocabulary grew, so did his confidence. During his third month in Germany, Nick told his host brother that “[he] couldn’t imagine spending [his] year with any other family.” He was beginning to feel more comfortable traveling throughout the city by himself and speaking German with the friends he was making from school. This transition happened quickly for Nick. He was shameless enough to make mistakes with the language and to take the criticism and the jokes and use them to improve his speaking. Nick began to feel more comfortable with his surroundings and, by Christmas in 2014, he was able to hold fluent conversations in German. He no longer struggled to communicate or commute through the city, nor did he struggle to make new friends in school. By his ninth month as an exchange student, Nick was fully immersed in the German culture. He was able to present school projects in German and hold meaningful conversations with his host family. During a vacation in January, 2015, his host family told Nick that he had “spoken in German while sleeping.” Nick found himself accepting the culture as a different way of living and was able to live that way. Instead of referring to them as his host family, Nick began to consider them a part of his true family. At one point towards the end if his year abroad, Nick told his friends that he “didn’t want to go back home. [He] was having too much fun [in Germany].” When it came time for Nick to return home, he had a very hard time saying goodbye to his new family and friends.

**Analysis:**

*Example 1: Zhu’s Culture Battle*

Zhu displayed the signs of going through the first three stages of Oberg’s culture shock. Zhu asked his host brother if he could “touch his hair” because it looked “really interesting.” This comment shows how strange and foreign everything was to Zhu. He asked to touch his host brother’s hair, something that is generally frowned upon in western cultures, because he was not used to its texture or color. Zhu was attuned to his own culture (Chinese), which led him to be fascinated by all of the new things around him, such as the buildings, the people, the overall culture and way of life in Germany. This child-like fascination with everything around him is equivalent to the honeymoon stage of culture shock because Zhu was so interested in the new culture in which he found himself. This excitement soon disappeared as Zhu made the transition to the second stage of culture shock when his homesickness manifested itself into aggression and hostility towards his host family and friends from school. He did not feel that anyone was “willing to help…,” so he was going to “just stop trying.” Through this attitude, he entered the aggression and hostility stage because he felt that no one was willing to help him overcome the problems he was having. Zhu did not fit in at school; he was not the same, and he could not make himself the same as the others, so he isolated himself. Through this isolation he was unable to improve his language skills, nor was he able to improve his relations with those around him (his host family, etc.). Only when Zhu began to open himself up to the German way of living (culture), was he able to break his shell and continue to the next stage of culture shock, the acceptance stage. By asking his host family to help him “learn the language as much as possible…” in German, Zhu was opening up the way into the new cultural environment. He was showing himself, as much as those around him, that he was willing to accept the German culture as another way of living by seeking to improve his abilities in the German language. Zhu became more social and was able to shake off the feeling that no one wanted to help him by making friends at school and associating more with his host family. Zhu was also unconsciously able to slightly shake the cultural norm of conforming to a group by accepting his differences to those around him. This important step into the acceptance stage helped him to become more confident and accept the culture, not necessarily as his own, but as another way of living. Zhu’s experience provides a good example to examine culture shock as he lived through three of the four stages described by Oberg. The analysis from his experiences supports the hypothesis that individuals must go through at least one of the stages of culture shock, although, the do not have to go through all four stages.

*Example 2: A trip to Germany and back again*

Nick exhibited the signs consistent with the second, third, and fourth stages of culture shock. At first, he felt that no one was willing to help him learn the aspects of the culture which were foreign to him. By saying, “They are just making it hard for me,” Nick progresses from being homesick to being angry at the locals; he blames the locals of going out of their way to create problems and hardships for him. These feelings are consistent with the second stage of culture shock because of the hostility and aggression Nick expressed toward the locals. Although he did not remain stuck in the second stage of culture shock, it is an important step in his transition to the third stage two months later. Having gone through the hardships of learning the language and parts of the culture, Nick found himself with an appreciation for the culture and language, an appreciation that he was able to use to make friends. This stage in Nick’s exchange year parallels the acceptance stage in that Nick began to open himself up to and accept the new culture and the host country (Germany). He told his host brother that he could not “imagine spending [his] year with another family.” This statement is very significant because it shows the progression of Nick’s feelings toward the locals from hostile to acceptance, and in this case, even caring. Not only did he accept the locals, but Nick also accepted the new culture as well. Another way Nick accepted the culture was becoming fluent in the language. It is rumored that when someone dreams in another language that they are fluent in that language, and being told that he had “spoken in German in his sleep” helped prove that Nick was nearing the complete acceptance stage. Since sleep talking is an extension of dreaming and is caused by dreaming, Nick talking in coherent German in his sleep proves that he was nearly fluent in German. Nick entered the final stage of culture shock, total acceptance of the culture with only minor grievances, by becoming fluent in the language and by accepting the culture as an alternate way of living. This idea is supported by Nick saying that he “didn’t want to go back home. [He] was having too much fun.” Nick was at the point in his culture shock that he felt at home in the new culture and had accepted most aspects of German culture. He was able to operate within the new culture without anxiety. Through analysis, it is shown that Nick went through only three of the stages of culture shock described by Oberg, but that he had a much different experience than did Zhu. Nice close

**Conclusion**

This paper explores two examples in which individuals experienced culture shock in different ways. In both examples, the individuals experienced only three of the four stages of Oberg’s culture shock. This study reveals that when placed in a foreign environment, individuals do experience culture shock; however, it begs the question of whether Oberg was correct to measure culture shock in stages and not levels, in which individuals experience culture shock differently depending on their cultural background and how similar the new culture is to their native culture. Zhu experienced the first, second, and third stage of culture shock, while Nick went through the second, third, and fourth stage of culture shock. The contrast in results helps to solidify the hypothesis that individuals experience culture shock differently and that they do not have to go through all four stages of it to experience culture shock itself. The analysis points to culture shock as an overall experience which affects different individuals to different extents. Although this study is limited in its research because of the small sample size, others interested in studying culture shock might use a larger sample size to generalize the results to a larger population. Another point of interest might be whether knowing the language beforehand has a noticeable effect on how the individual experiences culture shock. good

Works Cited

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**Lucid and interesting work. You do a fantastic job of presenting the lens in your lit review and your examples are apt. Your writing is very academic and the analysis filled with good insight. Your closing is especially impressive. My only quibbles are there’s a little repetition in the first three sections and I’d love for you to bring some quotes back from Oberg in the analysis, strengthening some of the points.**