

Culture Shock Among Young British Volunteers Working Abroad: Predictors, Risk Factors and Outcome

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Abstract This study investigates the factors and circumstances that predict culture shock in young British volunteers working abroad, to identify those at risk to their mental health and of early return home. A new questionnaire to measure culture shock was developed for the study, derived from the literature on culture shock and first-hand reports by volunteers. Three hundred and eighty young British volunteers working in 27 countries completed the questionnaire 3 weeks after arrival. Cultural distance was the strongest predictor of culture shock, accounting for 36% of variance in questionnaire scores, followed by problems at work (14%). Higher culture shock scores at 3 weeks predicted a greater risk of early return home and lower satisfaction with their time abroad.

Key words cultural differences • culture shock • human migration

INTRODUCTION

In his classic article on the effects on mental health of migration and residence in an alien culture, Odegard (1932) describes vividly the plight of newly arrived Norwegians in the USA:

Everywhere you are surrounded by people with strange and unfamiliar ways and customs, and you can hardly understand anything of what they say . . .

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They do not seem to be as friendly and helpful as the people at home . . . There are hundreds of things which tend to make you suspicious and bewildered, anxious, and lonely.

Humans are social beings; when our familiar social cues and norms of behaviour are suddenly replaced by a new set of cultural cues and behaviours, we experience disorientation and a degree of threat to our social identity. Where the move is rapid, and into a culture far removed from our own, a significant degree of emotional disturbance can be expected.

The term 'culture shock' was coined by an anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg, in a short descriptive article based on his personal observations of expatriate Americans (Oberg, 1960). Oberg likened culture shock to an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad. Some people make a good recovery and rapidly adjust to the new environment; in others, the condition can become chronic and debilitating. Many authors have attempted to redefine and extend Oberg's original description of culture shock. From studies of American Peace Corps volunteers, Guthrie (1975) preferred the term 'culture fatigue'. Smalley (1963) focused on difficulties in communication as 'language shock', and Byrnes (1966) on the concept of 'role shock'. Bock (1970) regarded culture shock as an anxiety reaction to being unable to understand, control or predict other people's behaviour.

In a comprehensive review of these different meanings, Taft (1977) has identified six distinct aspects of culture shock: (i) strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations; (ii) a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions; (iii) being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture; (iv) confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity; (v) surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; (vi) feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment. This summary of the concept of culture shock has been endorsed by Furnham and Bochner (1986) and is used as the basis of the current study.

Since Odegaard, the psychiatric literature on migration and mental health has been primarily concerned with the frequency of diagnosed mental disorders in ethnic minority groups – among refugees, *gastarbeiters*, settlers, etc. The social psychology literature is focused largely on the process of acculturation (cognitions and behaviour) and the psychological factors that facilitate or inhibit this process. Studies of short-term psychological reactions to encountering a new culture are rather fewer, mainly involving students studying overseas (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zwingmann & Gunn, 1983). Common sense would suggest that the greater the dissimilarity between two cultures, the more

pronounced this emotional reaction. This dissimilarity was conceptualized as 'cultural distance' in a study of overseas students in Edinburgh (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980), which found evidence to support the common-sense notion. Similar results were obtained by Furnham and Bochner (1982) who found that the degree of difficulty experienced by sojourners was directly related to the disparity between their culture of origin and the host society. Searle and Ward (1990) found that cultural distance predicted the socio-cultural difficulties of overseas students, but not their psychological well-being.

The American Peace Corps, probably the largest organized volunteer programme in history, found that up to 40% of volunteers dropped out, either in training or in the field. This high attrition rate provoked a great volume of research and a lively debate about its causes (Guthrie, 1975; Textor, 1966). In spite of employing a small army of social scientists, Peace Corps selectors found themselves unable to predict which volunteers would experience major difficulties and not complete their placement abroad. This failure led some psychologists to a major rethinking of the concept of personality, from a focus on enduring traits as a predictor of behaviour to an interest in the interaction between the person and the situation (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981). The starting point of the present study is to look for predictors of culture shock and non-completion of a volunteer's placement, not in their personality or previous life experience, but among factors in the new environment abroad.

THE SPECIFIC AIMS WERE TO:

- (1) measure the severity of culture shock in a cohort of young British volunteers during the first few weeks living in their new environment abroad,
- (2) investigate the factors and circumstances that predict the degree of culture shock,
- (3) determine the outcome, in terms of completed placements and subsequent satisfaction, of the volunteers' experience abroad.

METHOD

The subjects were 478 British school leavers (i.e. high-school graduates) who had been accepted by GAP Activity Projects for placements in 27 different countries worldwide. All were aged between 17 and 19 years; 36% were male and 64% female. Their destinations ranged from South and East Asia, Australasia, North and South America, to western and eastern Europe.

GAP is an educational charity which offers overseas voluntary work

opportunities to school leavers in their gap year between school and higher education or training. In the year of the study, 59% of applicants came from independent (fee-paying) schools and 41% from maintained (state) schools. GAP did not collect data on the ethnicity of applicants, but very few had non-British names. A wide choice of work placement is offered by GAP, ranging from teaching to working in children's homes and community development. GAP employs a 'project manager' for each country, who is responsible for finding and inspecting suitable posts, recruitment of suitable volunteers and briefing them in preparation for work abroad.

The project managers gave each GAP volunteer, shortly before departure from Britain, a sealed envelope with a set of questionnaires inside. Instructions printed on the outside of the envelope asked them to open it exactly 3 weeks after arrival at their placement abroad. It also contained another envelope addressed to GAP headquarters in Reading, UK, for returning the questionnaires immediately by post. The set of questionnaires consisted of (i) the Cultural Distance Index, (ii) the Culture Shock Questionnaire, and (iii) a series of mostly factual questions about arrangements on arrival in the country, the volunteer's work placement, living circumstances, health and well-being, and relationships with other GAP volunteers.

The Cultural Distance Index (CDI; Babiker et al., 1980) was developed during a study of overseas students in Edinburgh, to meet the need for an overall measure of cultural distance; it includes items on dress, language, food, religion, leisure, family structure and climate. A new self-administered version of the CDI was developed for the present study: a full account of its development and validation is given in Mumford and Babiker (1998).

The Culture Shock Questionnaire (CSQ; Mumford, 1998) was developed especially for the current study. The core items of this questionnaire were derived directly from the six aspects of culture shock as delineated by Taft (1977), redrafted in the form of questions. In order to tap additional domains of culture shock, a study was made of several hundred written reports by previous GAP volunteers, based on their experience and emotional reactions to working abroad. Many wrote of their feelings of anxiety and awkwardness in social interactions with people in the new culture, and occasionally of feelings of mistrust and frustration. Further questions were drafted to reflect this range of experience of the volunteers, under the general heading of 'interpersonal stress'. Details of the pilot study, selection of items and assessment of internal consistency and external criterion validity of the CSQ can be found in Mumford (1998).

Shortly after their return to the UK, each volunteer was sent a report form to complete, based on the usual GAP end-of-placement feedback form. Volunteers were asked to grade (from 'outstanding' to 'dreadful')

various aspects of their experience abroad and to complete the CSQ again retrospectively. On receipt at GAP headquarters, the responses to each of the questionnaires were entered into a computer database for analysis. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

RESULTS

Questionnaires were given to 478 volunteers (a complete half-year cohort) before they left Britain to work abroad on GAP projects. Three hundred and eighty completed questionnaires were returned to GAP headquarters, an overall response rate of 79%. The response rate varied among cohorts of volunteers going to different countries: with seven countries the response rate was 100%; five were below 70%, including one (Hungary) where only 23% response was achieved.

Volunteers were grouped according to country of destination; or, where numbers were small, into geographical regions (e.g. South America, eastern Europe). Mean scores on the culture shock questionnaire were calculated (Table 1).

Mean scores on the CDI were calculated for each group of volunteers,

TABLE 1
Culture shock scores by country

	<i>Number of GAP volunteers</i>	<i>Culture shock score (Mean)</i>	<i>(Max. range 0–24) SD</i>
India	47	9.80	3.05
Pakistan	8	9.63	5.68
Nepal	21	9.05	3.51
Malaysia	28	8.21	3.27
Tibetans in India	13	8.08	3.64
China	13	7.73	3.72
Indonesia	15	7.40	3.04
South America	16	7.25	3.30
Mexico	16	7.19	2.64
Israel	8	6.38	2.45
France	11	6.10	2.96
Eastern Europe	42	5.88	3.57
Hong Kong	10	5.80	3.26
Japan	18	5.56	3.45
USA	13	4.38	1.98
New Zealand	20	4.10	2.99
Canada	20	3.83	2.94
Australia	39	3.38	2.06
South Africa	4	3.25	1.89
Germany	10	2.70	2.26

by country or region. These are plotted against mean scores on the 12-item culture shock questionnaire in Figure 1; the correlation coefficient between them was 0.60 ($p < .001$).

In light of the very strong relationship between culture shock scores and the CDI, it was necessary to discount the effect of cultural distance in the analysis of other possible risk factors for culture shock.

GENDER

Female volunteers had higher mean scores on the 12-item culture shock questionnaire (6.9) than male volunteers (5.7) ($t = 2.95$, $p = .003$). This difference diminished when cultural distance was taken into account as a covariate (ANOVA: $F = 3.92$, $df = 1$, $p = .048$), indicating that female volunteers tended to choose placements in more exotic cultures.

ARRIVAL

About half of the volunteers were given a briefing seminar on arrival in their host country and a similar proportion had met the GAP agent in the country. An analysis of variance of culture shock scores, with the CDI score as a covariate, showed no significant effect for a briefing seminar on arrival

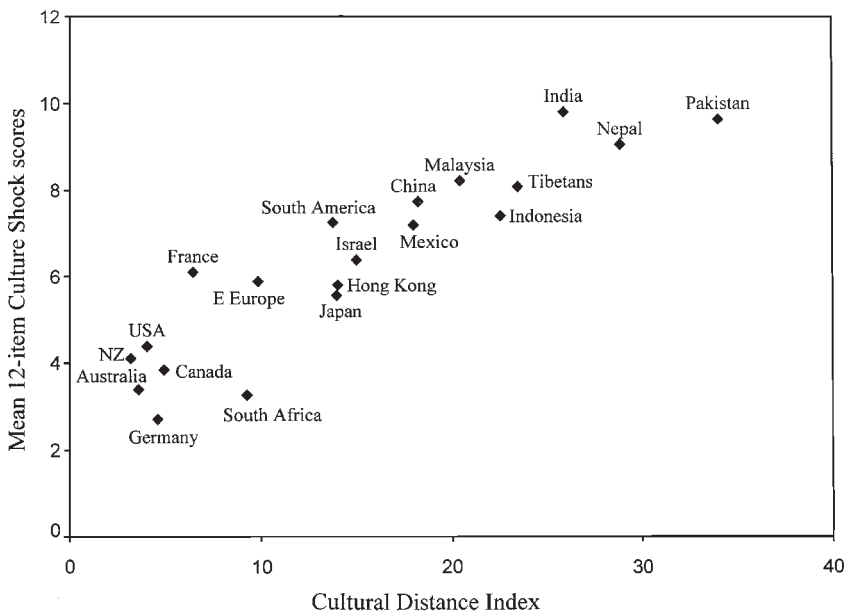


Figure 1. Culture shock scores by cultural distance.

or having been met by the GAP agent. However, 51% of subjects reported that they felt able to contact the GAP agent easily in an emergency, and this response was associated with lower culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 2.99$, $df = 2$, $p = .52$, with CDI as covariate).

COMPANY OF OTHER GAP VOLUNTEERS

Over three-quarters of the volunteers were accompanied by another GAP volunteer on the same placement, but there was no significant difference in culture shock scores whether or not the volunteer had a GAP partner, when the effect of cultural distance was discounted. For those who had a fellow GAP volunteer on the same placement, there was no significant effect on culture shock scores whether they reported getting along 'very well', 'satisfactorily' or with 'some difficulty'. For those who were alone on their placement, it made no difference to their culture shock scores whether or not they had regular contact with other GAP volunteers in the same country.

THE WORKPLACE

Sixty per cent of volunteers reported that they found their employer or supervisor 'very helpful', 32% 'satisfactory' and 5% 'not helpful'. There was a very strong, progressive association between having a less helpful employer/supervisor and higher culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 24.90$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$, with CDI as covariate). Subjects were asked whether their host had made adequate preparations for their arrival: higher culture shock scores were associated with reports of equivocal or poor preparation ($F = 5.46$, $df = 2$, $p = .005$). Fifty-one per cent of volunteers felt that their work was worthwhile, 42% 'sometimes' worthwhile and 5% not worthwhile. There was a very strong, progressive association between reporting a less worthwhile work placement and higher culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 28.26$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$, with CDI as covariate).

SURROUNDINGS, FOOD AND HEALTH

Fifty-one per cent of subjects found their physical surroundings 'very beautiful', 38% 'pleasant enough' and 7% 'ugly'. There was a progressive association between reporting less pleasant surroundings and higher culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 5.67$, $df = 2$, $p = .004$, with cultural distance as a covariate). Only 35% of volunteers reported that their food was 'always' palatable, 56% found it so 'most of the time' and 6% said that their food was 'rarely' palatable. Higher culture shock scores were associated with increasingly unpalatable food (ANOVA: $F = 7.17$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$,

with CDI as covariate). Fifty-one per cent of subjects had suffered from stomach upsets or other illnesses since their arrival, and these ailments were associated with significantly higher culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 3.97$, $df = 2$, $p = .020$, with CDI as covariate).

LIVING CIRCUMSTANCES

Eighteen per cent of volunteers were living with a family, 45% were sharing a room with another GAP volunteer and 7% with some other person. However, none of these factors showed any significant association with culture shock scores, taking cultural distance into account as a covariate. In response to the question, 'How much personal freedom do you have in your present situation?', 48% of volunteers reported 'limited freedom' and 5% that they were 'very restricted'. There was a strong, progressive association between reporting less freedom and having higher culture shock scores (ANOVA: $F = 4.77$, $df = 2$, $p = .009$, with CDI as covariate).

RISK FACTORS IN COMBINATION

A stepwise multiple linear regression (MLR) procedure was used to determine the relative importance of the risk factors for culture shock and whether they were independent of each other. Each factor that had been significantly associated with culture shock in the previous analyses was entered into the procedure. Table 2 shows the final result of the stepwise MLR analysis, namely the combination of variables which account for the maximum variance in culture shock scores. After cultural distance, factors associated with the work placement showed the strongest association with culture shock scores.

TABLE 2
Multiple linear regression on culture shock scores

Variable	B	T	Sig T	Variance explained ^a (%)
Cultural Distance Index	0.187	11.792	.0000	36
Feeling that work is not worthwhile	1.678	6.199	.0000	9
Unhelpful employer/supervisor	1.412	5.545	.0000	5
Less palatable food	0.789	2.987	.0030	2
Less pleasant physical surroundings	0.682	2.889	.0041	1
Female gender	0.842	2.700	.0073	1

^a Additional percentage variance explained by entering this variable into the regression equation, calculated from change in adjusted R^2 .

OUTCOME OF PLACEMENT

Non-completers Twelve GAP volunteers (2.3%) failed to complete their placement and returned home early: six from USA and Canada, two from Malaysia, two from Eastern Europe, and one each from Paraguay and India. Seven non-completers were female and five were male. The reasons given for non-completion included inability to settle (4), homesickness (3), disillusionment with placement (2), depression (1) and lack of language (1). Five of the 12 non-completers returned their initial questionnaires to GAP headquarters: their culture shock scores were all in the highest quartile, and one had the second highest score of any volunteer in the study. All but one reported major problems at work.

End-of-placement reports Of 368 volunteers who had returned their initial questionnaires and completed their placement, 216 (59%) returned their end-of-placement report form. Volunteers were asked to think back over their whole placement and respond to the same 12-item culture shock questionnaire (with the verbs altered to the past tense). Each volunteer's original score was subtracted from the end-of-placement score to yield a difference score. The mean overall decrease in culture shock scores was 0.51 (95% CI 0.17 to 0.86). The largest percentage decrease was found among those volunteers with the highest initial culture shock scores. A few volunteers annotated their end-of-placement questionnaires to indicate that their intense initial experience of culture shock had lessened significantly by the end of their period abroad.

As part of their end-of-placement report form, volunteers were asked to grade their overall experience as (A) outstanding, (B) worthwhile, (C) mediocre, (D) disappointing or (E) dreadful. One-hundred and forty (65%) rated their experience as 'outstanding', 66 (31%) as 'worthwhile', two as 'mediocre' and one as 'disappointing'. Volunteers who rated their experience as only 'worthwhile' had had significantly higher initial culture shock scores than those who rated their experience as 'outstanding' (ANOVA: $F = 11.10$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$). This relationship between initial culture shock scores and retrospective assessment of satisfaction became even stronger when cultural distance was taken into account as a covariate in the analysis of variance (ANOVA: $F = 20.02$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). There was no significant relationship between cultural distance scores and volunteers' overall assessment of satisfaction with their GAP placement.

DISCUSSION

The overall response rate to the principal questionnaire (79%) can be considered to be good for a postal survey. However, it varied widely among cohorts of volunteers going to different countries, suggesting that some

groups of volunteers were not so well briefed by the project manager who distributed the questionnaires before their departure from Britain. The existence of such cohort factors in non-response reduces the likelihood that individual bias has seriously undermined the results of this study.

The scores on the CSQ by country (Table 1) are broadly in line with expectations. The position of France is anomalous, probably owing to unusually demanding placements, for example living in religious communities with homeless people on the fringes of provincial towns. Culture shock scores would be expected to reflect the particular micro-culture in which the volunteers were placed. For example, placements in Tibetan refugee villages in India showed lower culture shock scores than other placements in India or Nepal. Being placed in a well-run school for Tibetan refugee children serving western food to staff, adopting western dress, with some electrical appliances, will be a very different experience from living in a remote village in Nepal or Pakistan.

A strong correlation was found between the volunteers' scores on the CSQ and the 'cultural distance' they had travelled from Britain, as measured by the CDI; the CDI accounted for 36% of the variance in CSQ scores. This result parallels the findings of previous studies of socio-cultural difficulties experienced by overseas students (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). However, in contrast to previous studies, the CSQ used in the present study focuses exclusively on the subjective feelings ('social emotions') relating to the initial experience of encountering another culture.

After discounting the effect of cultural distance, the most potent risk factors focused around work: for example, an unhelpful employer or supervisor who had not made adequate preparation for the volunteer's arrival, and not having worthwhile work to do. Problems at work accounted for an additional 14% of variance in culture shock scores. An unsatisfactory work placement seemed to have a marked effect on the initial experience of culture shock.

One methodological limitation of the study is that it gives only a snapshot of culture shock at 3 weeks. This point was chosen, somewhat arbitrarily, in order to capture the initial phase of culture shock. There has been a lively debate about the stages of culture shock in individuals, whether symptoms fluctuate according to a U-curve (Church, 1982; Hsiao-Ying, 1995; Zwingmann & Gunn, 1983) or W-curve if you include re-entry to one's home culture (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The empirical evidence for U-curves is weak because there have been few longitudinal studies (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The heuristic value of the U-curve model is probably limited because different psychological and behavioural variables are likely to wax and wane according to different time-scales, and may vary greatly among individuals.

When volunteers in this study were asked retrospectively about culture shock, in effect averaging their experience over their whole time abroad, their results in respect of CSQ scores showed little discrepancy from their CSQ scores at 3 weeks. Several volunteers commented that their intense initial experience of culture shock had lessened considerably by the end of their time abroad; this was reflected in the largest percentage decrease in CSQ scores being found among volunteers with the highest initial CSQ scores.

Of recent studies of 'sojourners', the closest parallel to the present study was conducted among 178 New Zealand American Field Service students aged 16–29 years residing in 23 different countries (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). The authors drew a distinction between psychological and socio-cultural adjustment, and found that 55% of the variance in psychological adjustment was accounted for by homesickness, external locus of control, life changes and social difficulty; 52% of the variance in socio-cultural adaptation was accounted for by cultural distance, language ability, satisfaction with host national contact, cultural separation and mood disturbance. This study highlights the difficulty of separating out 'predictor' and 'outcome' variables when trying to test a causal hypothesis about culture shock or cultural adjustment.

The choice of a cohort of short-term volunteers in the present study does not allow any test of the power of the CSQ to predict longer-term difficulties in cultural adjustment. In his original study of Norwegian migrants to the USA, Odegard (1932) found that the excess inception rate of mental illnesses requiring admission to a psychiatric hospital continued for over 10 years after the migration itself. The extended sojourn, with little prospect of returning home, may be stressful in quite different ways from the experience of the short-term volunteer.

The volunteers' CSQ scores at 3 weeks did predict their overall satisfaction with their time abroad, as expressed in the end-of-placement responses. Volunteers who rated their overall experience as 'worthwhile' as opposed to 'outstanding' had had significantly higher culture shock scores. However, emotional upheaval is not necessarily an unpleasant experience, and 82% of volunteers reported that they found their new environment interesting and exciting 'most of the time'. In their written reports, many GAP volunteers reported that they had experienced the extremes of emotions – elation and homesickness, curiosity and repugnance, excitement and confusion. Life was not meant to be easy for the culture traveller. GAP publicity literature emphasizes the personal rewards of a 'gap' year in learning to face challenges and the growth of personal maturity.

A very small percentage (2.3%) of this cohort of GAP volunteers failed to complete their placement abroad. The reasons given to GAP were varied. Unfortunately only five of the 12 non-completers returned their initial

questionnaires, but these showed well above average CSQ scores (one volunteer had an exceptionally high CSQ score) and most reported major problems at work. This very small non-completion rate contrasts with the experience of the Peace Corps, where non-completion rates often exceeded 40%, admittedly over a longer time span of 3 years. Selection factors may have played a large part: many volunteered for the Peace Corps to escape the draft to Vietnam, whereas for GAP volunteers it was a positive choice, even in their choice of destination country, and they had to be motivated enough to raise their own finance for the GAP fee and their travelling expenses.

How are severe (and potentially harmful) emotional reactions to an unfamiliar culture to be prevented? Furnham and Bochner (1982, 1986) view the culture shock phenomenon as a problem in 'culture learning'. In their opinion, the stress experienced by the culture traveller is largely due to a lack of the requisite social skills with which to negotiate specific social situations. The situations that are particularly troublesome are those involving personal contact with members of the host culture (e.g. as reflected in the 'interpersonal stress' items of the CSQ). Their study of social networks of overseas students in Britain found that they had very few friends from the host culture who might have acted as informal culture guides and trainers (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). They advocate the recruitment of a 'culture friend' to explain and interpret the new culture to the sojourner, and structured culture training programmes.

It is disappointing, in the present study, that attempts by GAP to introduce their volunteers to their new culture were not associated with any diminution of culture shock scores. Neither a briefing seminar on arrival in the country (in addition to the briefing which all volunteers received in Britain before their departure), nor a meeting with the local GAP agent in the country, achieved any measurable reduction in CSQ scores. It may be more beneficial to have a 'culture friend' 1, 2 or 3 weeks after arrival, rather than at the outset, to interpret one's cultural experience as it unfolds; it may not be possible to do this effectively in advance.

In terms of prevention, the clear message which comes through in this study is that problems at work are the major risk factor for culture shock, over and above the cultural distance travelled. Sending organizations like GAP would seem to have a responsibility to ensure that work placements are as satisfactory as possible. Unsatisfactory placements should be improved or abandoned. A question for further research is whether an initiative along the lines of Furnham and Bochner's recommendations, of recruiting a 'culture friend' or offering structured culture training programmes, could reduce culture shock and its harmful consequences.

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APPENDIX

CULTURE SHOCK QUESTIONNAIRE

A. 'Core' Culture Shock Items

1. Do you feel strain from the effort to adapt to a new culture?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
2. Have you been missing your family and friends back home?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
3. Do you feel generally accepted by the local people in the new culture?
No
Not sure
Yes
4. Do you ever wish to escape from your new environment altogether?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
5. Do you ever feel confused about your role or identity in the new culture?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
6. Have you found things in your new environment shocking or disgusting?
Many things
A few things
None
7. Do you ever feel helpless or powerless when trying to cope with the new culture?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all

B. Interpersonal Stress Items

1. Do you feel anxious or awkward when meeting local people?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
2. When talking to people, can you make sense of their gestures or facial expressions?
Not at all
Occasionally
Most of the time
3. Do you feel uncomfortable if people stare at you when you go out?
Very uncomfortable
Slightly uncomfortable
Not at all
4. When you go out shopping, do you feel as though people may be trying to cheat you?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all
5. Are you finding it an effort to be polite to your hosts?
Most of the time
Occasionally
Not at all

Scoring: First response = 2, Second response = 1, Third response = 0

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