

## CHAPTER TWO

# What is Culture Shock and How Does it Affect People Living, Studying, and Working Abroad?

### Introduction

Imagine moving to a new country where everything is strange. You have no friends or family members nearby, and you do not speak the language, except how to ask where the nearest bathroom is located. You do not even know how or what to order in a restaurant. As the days go by, you lose your sense of euphoria at being in a new country, and become increasingly anxious and disoriented. Depression sneaks in and ruins your days; even getting out of bed becomes a chore. This scenario is fairly realistic of the early symptoms of **CULTURE SHOCK**—a term first coined by Oberg (1960).

Nolan (1990: 2) defines culture as “a pattern of meaning, a way of defining the world” that enables us to survive. Each of us has a sense of the way things ought to be—this sense is deeply ingrained, and has

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KEY TERMS: culture shock, enculturation, norm, communication, non-verbal cues, proxemics, cultural identity, biculturalism

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been learned since birth through the process of **ENCULTURATION**. Our ideals, values, and beliefs generate acceptable behaviour for a particular culture, but when we move to another culture, we leave our familiar world behind and enter another one that is difficult to understand since it operates under another set of rules that take time to learn. In this new environment, we are no longer able to predict other people's behaviour. This unpredictability creates a sense of insecurity that can be debilitating and cause culture shock (Haviland et al. 2005).

Culture shock is a stress-related syndrome that causes feelings of confusion, hostility, disorientation, and depression (Nolan 1990). It occurs when we find ourselves in foreign environments, where the people are culturally diverse. We meet people who live in different ways, speak different languages, and hold different beliefs and values on such matters as the status of women. This "otherness" makes people uncomfortable and insecure.

Culture shock is generally not a permanent condition, nor does it strike people who are in a new place for only a short time. However, the more extended the stay, and the more different the host country, the more likely culture shock will strike. This means the casual tourist booked into a Club Med will likely not experience real culture shock, but the young backpacker away from home for six months will. The same holds true for anthropologists embarking on ethnographic fieldwork. Unfortunately, knowing that culture shock will strike does little to ease the unpleasantness.

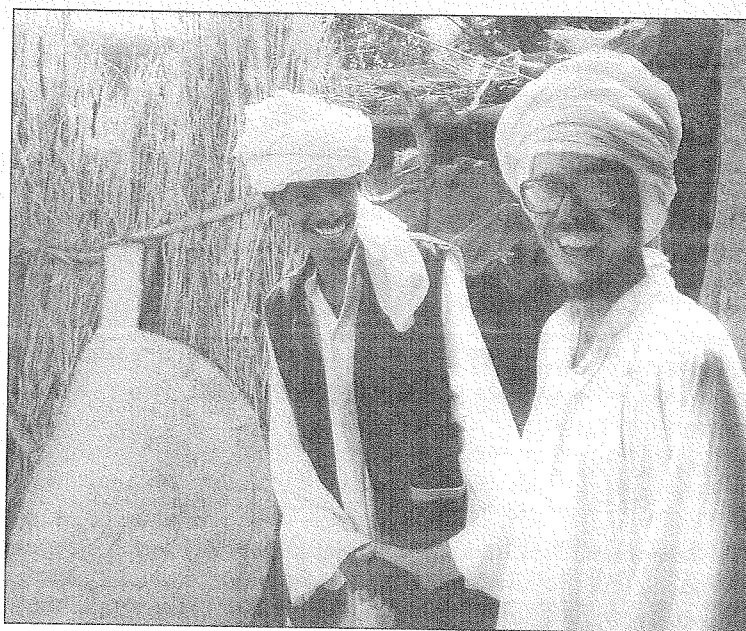
In this chapter we will consider some of the problems individuals, including anthropologists, encounter in a foreign environment, and the coping strategies for dealing with the debilitating symptoms of culture shock. In keeping with the multidisciplinary nature of anthropology, the expertise and insights of psychologists in studying culture shock will also be drawn on. Throughout this chapter you will be introduced to anecdotal stories of anthropologists and the problems they have encountered that often lead to culture shock.

Author's purpose

## Anthropologists and Culture Shock

Despite their "insider" understanding of culture shock, anthropologists are not immune to the experience any more than other visitors to a foreign environment. When William C. Young headed into the field to study the Rashaayda Bedouin of Sudan in 1978, he found himself in a vastly different world from the one he left behind in the United States (Young 1996). Instead of cars, he rode a camel, and instead of cities with tall buildings, shops, restaurants, and freeways, he lived in a goat-hair tent in the middle of the empty desert. At first, Young felt awkward living in a close-knit and highly structured society, but gradually he became friends with his Rashaayda hosts and grew comfortable with





Ethnographer William Young with one of his Rashiidi hosts.

his new lifestyle. He learned the language, wore their traditional clothing, and, most important of all, learned to think and live as a Rashiidi (Fedorak 2006). Before leaving home, Young had converted to Islam, hoping this would make him more acceptable to the Rashaayda and help him understand their world view. This was certainly a drastic step, and not one many anthropologists would be willing to take.

Once the excitement of making contact and getting established among the Mardu Aborigines of the Gibson Desert in western Australia wore off, Robert Tonkinson (1991) experienced culture shock. He endured bouts of depression, a sense of inadequacy, frustration, anger, and even paranoia. Above all, he was consumed with a sense of being an outsider, regardless of how the Mardu welcomed him into their lives. Tonkinson credited the Mardu children with helping him overcome his culture shock. They welcomed him warmly, and accepted him into their midst. Both Young and Tonkinson moved into cultural groups that were very different from their own, which likely exacerbated the degree of culture shock they experienced.

One of the more stirring encounters with culture shock is the story of anthropologist Victoria J. Baker's experiences in a Sinhalese village in Sri Lanka (Baker 1998). At first Baker was enthralled with the exoticness of Sri Lanka, and the mixture of modern with traditional. On any given street in Colombo, she might encounter a jumble of three-wheeled carts, slow-moving ox carts, and luxury vehicles, only to see sari-clad women delicately picking their way through the noise, filth, and confusion. Signs of poverty were everywhere, yet Baker also spotted luxury hotels and restaurants, and private clubs with manicured lawns.

novels. She also took advantage of the natural beauty and peacefulness of the region, often reading outside, enjoying the beautiful waterfall and pond, and trees dripping with fruit.

Baker also faced personal dangers. In Sri Lanka, wild animals, such as leopards and elephants, and Tamil terrorists threatened the safety of the Sinhalese and, by association, Baker. Although none of the above dangers caused Baker any problems directly, in the case of poisonous snakes, the situation was different. One day she discovered a snake crawling on her kitchen table. She chased it away with a broom, but still felt uneasy. The villagers cleared the brush around her hut and advised her to get a cat, which she did. Unfortunately the snakes still visited.

Obviously anthropologists must delve deeper into the reasons and mechanisms of culture shock. Most of the research to date has focused on individuals; however, Nolan (1990) believes that moving into a new cultural environment may be mediated by a group or organization, such as an exchange program, development agency, funding agency, and even the media. These groups may structure and control the transitional experience more than originally thought. According to Nolan (1990) more consideration of the role these groups play in cultural transition and culture shock may help us learn to manage it.

Contact with home and the "outside" world helps alleviate culture shock. Here ethnographer Victoria Baker receives mail from home.



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## A Discussion of Culture Shock

Culture shock involves several stages, beginning with a feeling of euphoria and fascination with the new culture, often called the honeymoon phase (Nolan 1990). These feelings of awe wear off after a few weeks and then the symptoms of the crisis phase of culture shock begin: sadness, crying bouts, homesickness and loneliness, insomnia or sleeping too much, loss of appetite, irritability, and feelings of inadequacy. Depending on personality and circumstances, more serious symptoms, such as depression, physical manifestations of illness, confusion, obsession with cleanliness, and unwillingness to interact with others, may develop (Guanipa 1998). Students studying abroad who exhibit these symptoms must also deal with academic pressures and the insecurity of entering a new school (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001). Anthropologists who have experienced culture shock complain most about the inability to concentrate and carry on with their fieldwork.

In the second stage of culture shock, individuals may become frustrated with their inability to communicate and perform necessary tasks, such as finding a laundry, and they may begin to lose patience with their host country. Simple problems, such as not finding favourite foods (e.g., peanut butter) in local stores can create an outburst of irrational anger. They may also begin to feel a sense of loss for their home culture and way of life, often explained away as homesickness (Nolan 1990).

When anthropologist Ellen Holmes (1992) set out for American Samoa, she expected things to be much like the United States. On the surface this proved true; Samoa had hotels with air conditioning, electricity, telephones, banks, and supermarkets. Yet, it was different too. The interior of the island was poverty-stricken, banks were "limited" in their services, inter-island air service was unreliable, and the rats and geckos were too friendly. All of these concerns may seem trivial to us, but at the time overwhelmed Holmes. Culture shock struck in full force, reducing her to crying bouts, angry outbursts, depression, and constant frustration.

In the recovery phase, people become more comfortable with their surroundings and may begin to adopt some of the local lifestyle (Nolan 1990). Glitches in the daily routine do not bother them as much. They learn the social norms and behaviours of their new culture. As such, they have accomplished a degree of cultural transition. Nolan (1990) likens this cultural transition to a rite of passage. In the last few weeks of Holmes's research, even though she was on a much less developed island, Western Samoa, she found it easier to adjust, and events that would have frustrated her to the extreme when she first arrived in American Samoa, such as driving on a narrow road that ended up blocked by a fallen tree, no longer bothered her—she could now "go with the flow."

I prepared for my return trip by putting on Western clothes again and taking my Rashiidi clothes to a laundry. While they were being washed I went to the airline office to have my flight reservation confirmed. I missed having a turban on my head; the bright Sudanese sunlight felt hot. I still wore sandals, however, until the last minute before my departure. I remember leaving my sandals in the airport parking lot and putting on shoes and socks for the first time in two years. Shortly after I boarded my plane.

The return flight was disorienting. I felt anxious about missing the prayer during the long flight and was worried about eating pork (which is forbidden to Muslims)... When the meals were served, it seemed strange to eat with a knife and fork again after eating with my hands—more exactly, my right hand only—for so long....

When I landed at Dulles International Airport I found myself reacting negatively to much of what I saw. It struck me as a terrible waste of money to have an expensive machine polishing the floor at the airport; what was the point of having a gleaming floor? I was disgusted by the many ads for alcoholic beverages and their photos of people in immodest, revealing clothing.

WILLIAM YOUNG (1996: 136)

When a person returns to their home culture, they may experience reverse culture shock.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside everything they have learned and readjusting to their home culture can be challenging. Students returning home after completing their education often suffer severe reverse culture shock. Although anthropologists welcome rejoining their family and life, they may also experience anxiety about meeting with old friends and associates. They often express less satisfaction with life in their home country and a feeling of loss. When William Young (1996) returned from his two-year stay with the Rashaayda Bedouin in 1980, he experienced reverse culture shock. Using utensils to eat, wasting water on such things as cleaning floors, women dressed in immodest clothing, and a landscape full of tall buildings and rushing vehicles all seemed strange to him.

## CHALLENGES OF LIVING IN A FOREIGN ENVIRONMENT

Because culture shock is a personal experience, and manifests itself in many ways depending on a person's personality, ability to adapt to new social norms, and previous experience in foreign settings, strategies for coping with culture shock can take many forms. In this section, we will examine some of the ways travellers and anthropologists have dealt with culture shock.

Even if the new culture is quite similar to our home country, there will be problems. Years ago, when my daughter lived in London, UK, during a telephone conversation she complained about the lack of good mustard in the supermarkets. The mustard was not the problem; her frustration with the difficulties she was experiencing in her daily life was the real issue. Becoming familiar with the neighbourhood, finding services and resources necessary to live comfortably, and "learning the culture" go a long way toward easing these petty frustrations.

Ward et al. (2001: 51) identifies culture learning as the "process whereby sojourners acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in their new society." Living successfully in a foreign environment requires a great deal of determination, fortitude, and a bit of luck. Learning the language as soon as possible is of paramount importance. Being able to communicate is vital to a sense of well-being, and will help with daily tasks such as ordering food at a restaurant. Enrolling in language classes also provides opportunities to interact with other people in a similar situation. Linguistic problems create the most serious problems for students, academically and socially. Without sufficient command of the language, students have difficulty with course work, and lack the language skills to seek help from instructors or fellow students. They also experience difficulty making friends who might lessen their loneliness and help ease them into the cultural life of their host country.

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Intercultural **COMMUNICATION** skills go beyond learning to speak the language. They also involve learning the conventions of a society, for example, **NON-VERBAL CUES**, such as appropriateness of gaze, **PROXEMICS** (personal space use), greetings, use of touch and gestures, responding to requests, and assertion of one's self (Ward et al. 2001). Forms of address also vary from one culture to another. On a recent visit to China, I was faced with the challenge of appropriately addressing the people I was visiting. In China, the surname has always come first and the given name last, which causes initial confusion for North Americans. While Canadians tend to address each other by first names, in China adults are usually addressed as Mr. and Mrs., although this is only a recent innovation. Until about 10 years ago, the Chinese of Shanghai addressed each other as "comrade," and Mr. and Mrs. was reserved for the wealthy and powerful.

Missing family and friends can be debilitating. When anthropologist Gail A. Fondahl (1998) spent months conducting fieldwork among the Evenki of southeastern Siberia, she relied on the kindness of a family to help her get over her homesickness. The Evenkis were generous with their hospitality and advice, and helped with arrangements. Students on international exchanges have found that if they make friends, and develop a social support network, they experience a more satisfying and academically productive life. These networks serve to facilitate students in becoming accustomed to their new environment and the behavioural norms, as well as providing social outlets to relieve homesickness and stress.

In 1963, when Richard Lee (2003) was living with the Ju/'hoansi hunting and gathering people of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, tragic news reached him via his transistor radio: President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Like all Americans, Lee was in shock, but unlike his compatriots, he had no one with whom to share his grief. His hosts, the Dobe Ju/'hoansi, had never heard of President Kennedy or the United States. Culture shock usually shows itself during these times, even in an experienced ethnographer like Richard Lee.

Although it would be foolish to suggest that people who move to a new country completely assume a new **CULTURAL IDENTITY**, over time they may take on many of the characteristics of an adopted culture. A form of **BICULTURALISM** develops, where they identify with and become a part of two cultures. At times, this comes about through developing a rapport with members of the host community. Richard Lee was adopted into the family of N!eishi and //Gumi. With this acceptance, his position changed from that of an outsider to that of a full member of a Dobe Ju/'hoansi family, and he was expected to learn the role of a Ju/'hoansi son.

Bouts of culture shock experienced by professional anthropologists are rites of passage that forever change them, professionally and personally. The same can be said for other individuals living in foreign countries, who have worked their way through culture shock. The fol-

lowing narrative tells the story of a young man from Canada who moved to Shanghai, China, to teach English.

I have lived in China for two and a half years. Before moving here I traveled often, though mostly in Europe and North America. I also spent five months studying in Hong Kong and six weeks traveling through mainland China in 2002. So I came to Shanghai in the fall of 2003 pretty much knowing what I was getting into—or so I thought.

I teach English at a language training center. Most of my friends are foreigners, most of my life is lived in a Western style, and most of the time I use English, my native language, to communicate. Fortunately, I also enjoy the company of several good local friends, and a girlfriend who is Shanghaiese.

Living in Shanghai is not quite like living in the rest of China. Thousands of foreigners make Shanghai their home (20,000–30,000 in a city with 12 million in the metropolitan area). They come here because it is a middle ground—the East and West meet here. There are pubs when I need them, ATMs where I can withdraw directly from bank accounts back home, and good Western food if I want to pay Western prices. Thus, the shock experienced in Shanghai, while significant, is probably quite tempered compared with life in a small Chinese town in the countryside.

My first eight to twelve weeks in Shanghai were fairly positive, mostly because I was so busy settling into a new job, apartment, and meeting new people. Like other new expats, I wondered at everything, and relished the differences in art, technology, food, and lifestyle. I only noticed the positive side of Shanghai culture and social life, and given the amount of information I had to absorb, I really did not have time to make judgments, positive or negative. After all, change was the reason I chose to live abroad, to experience something different. There was a great deal to look at, from the neon signs, to the women with tremendous fashion sense, to the markets and bazaars with unfamiliar products. My initial reaction was wonder and even a bit of awe. I have found that foreigners who are only staying for the short term (less than one year) seem to stick to this stage and not move too deeply into the later stages of culture shock. The fact that they are leaving in a short time leads them to view many problems with a sense of humor, rather than as a life crisis.

Then came stage two, which after two years, I am still experiencing. This was the period when I started noticing the cultural differences more clearly, usually in a negative light. I found myself getting angry and frustrated over little things



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that can make a day go smoothly or not, and mood swings were frequent. Some of the more unpleasant aspects of Shanghai became more noticeable, like the monstrous traffic problems, inconsiderate people, the awful working conditions most workers suffer, and low-quality workmanship on products. I constantly resisted the urge to educate my hosts and change their ways to something more similar to my own. "Why do you do it this way?" is perhaps the most common question I ask, and usually the answer fails to convince me that the Chinese way is better than my way. I know this is due to my different viewpoint from the locals, who are used to their customs and are relatively indifferent to other options. I continue to struggle with the conflict between accepting my hosts' habits and customs and attempting to change them.

In the third stage of culture shock, a foreigner has lived in their adopted country (perhaps one to five years) and has come to grips with the immense but subtle cultural differences and deals with them with more ease. They understand more of the historical and cultural background, and experience fewer surprises. I have only witnessed stage three in others. I know there are continuing waves of culture shock and corresponding frustration, stress, and anxiety, but they are shorter in duration and less severe than in stage two. At this point, the foreigner is fairly adapted to the local culture (though not necessarily assimilated into it).

One of the problems I continually encounter is what I, with my Western upbringing, consider bad manners or habits. Many Chinese spit, whenever and wherever they please. The Shanghainese claim they do not spit in the streets; it is the millions of migrants that have come to the city. The migrant workers are generally less-educated and very poor. However, to a Westerner, this detail is of little relevance—they live in Shanghai, they are Shanghainese. Hygiene is a problem here, and considering all the deadly diseases developing in this part of the world, is of serious concern. I find it difficult to get used to some of the typical street behaviour, such as the constant pushing to get on the buses, subways, and elevators. Other behaviour is less annoying, and at times even humorous. Elderly men, in particular, have a habit of wearing pajamas out on the street, to do errands in the morning, and sometimes all day. The Shanghainese also throw their garbage everywhere; the logic being that someone has a job to clean it up.

The odd thing is the Shanghainese tend not to say much to change the bad habits of those around them. Since no one speaks up, no one changes, and the spitting continues (even though there are signs forbidding spitting in the streets for

hygienic reasons). Part of this attitude comes from the importance of face. One shouldn't lose face, or cause others to lose face, and yelling at someone who has spit on the sidewalk makes both parties lose face. Another reason is probably the Cultural Revolution, when those who displayed good manners and courtesy were accused of being bourgeois lackeys. Thus, middle-aged men and women are the worst offenders, while younger people are generally a little more pleasant to be around.

Obviously, one way that I try to cope with cultural differences is to rationalize them, but it does not always work. Culture, to be sure, is hardly rational at times. I should note, however, that until writing this piece, I never gave much thought to coping techniques, and I would argue that most people don't, they are merely aware that they are 'coping' on a subliminal level. Foreigners do know, however, that certain activities make them feel better.

As you can see, I am not over some things and still mired in stage two of culture shock. Most of the time I ignore the little things—they are merely background noise. I do not want China to become Western, but I still impose some of my Western ideals and values on my vision of what China should and could be. There are often two or more ways of doing things, but the trap I often fall into is selecting one as better or superior, and one as inferior.

The Shanghainese are fairly used to foreigners, but their counterparts across China, in general, are not. Many of them migrate into Shanghai looking for work or to celebrate holidays. Westerners are a curiosity, and in particular white Westerners with blonde or red hair and blue, grey, or green eyes. Many have never seen us before except on television. Luckily, the Chinese tend to have an honest desire to look, smile, wave, and say 'hello' to foreigners. I have had people stare at me with their mouths wide open, and even walk into walls or trip because they were watching me and my friends. How do I respond? I usually ignore it, sometimes I say hello to them, which often provokes laughter and chattering among several locals, as if I was a parrot or even a monkey chirping back at them. It does get annoying at times. Anyone insecure with their looks or body will have a hard time in China. However, some people enjoy being treated as different and interesting. Indeed, I am not an Average Joe in China; I have been transformed into a mini-celebrity because of my skin colour and background.

Eating can be a challenge in China, and I don't mean chopsticks, which I mastered in Hong Kong. There are countless other issues involved. Chinese socializing revolves around

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food. First, the style of food and ordering: Chinese food is meant for several people to eat together and share the dishes. A foreigner eating alone is forced to eat four dishes themselves or order 'something, something on rice.' This, combined with language difficulties, ensures most foreigners have about four or five dishes to choose from for every meal. There is Western food, but not much, and it is expensive, except for places like KFC and McDonald's. Ordering food with unfamiliar idiom-type names is also a problem. Sometimes I think I will never learn it all. Sometimes I just want a hot meal, but I mistakenly order cold dishes. Sometimes I like to experiment, and it can turn out great or ruin the meal. Second, what they do to the food is too different for me. Bone shards in meat are a problem. The locals like their food cooked 'close to the bone.' Once the meat is cooked, it is chopped up, bone and all, resulting in shards of bone, often with blood and marrow seeping out. The Chinese habit of spitting out the bone shards onto the table also disturbs me.

The many positive aspects of Chinese culture include the honest curiosity about foreigners, the love of family, the variety and flavours of the food, and spending hours on end just sitting and talking over meals or drinks. They are a social people, and sensitive, uptight, privacy-loving. Westerners find it difficult to fit in. The Chinese do often treat strangers on the street (locals and foreigners) as something insignificant or as an inconvenience, but once within their circle of friends they are the most generous, loyal, and warm-hearted people. I have had the honour of being welcomed into a Chinese family and found that the differences in manner and thought with Westerners are huge, but the love and goals in life are the same.

In sum, to me, culture shock is knowing that someone is talking about me, but not understanding if what they are saying is derogatory or complimentary. It is also the frustration I feel when trying to communicate in some important way—whether telling someone I love them or speaking my mind—but not being able to do it effectively. Getting over culture shock, or at least dealing with it, requires patience, persistence, and time. Shrugging my shoulders is often the best I can do. The best remedy, by far, is frequent gatherings with other foreigners. We get together informally, at a pub, at work, or just on the street, and vent our frustrations. We love the country, we want to stay, but we need to perform this ritual exercise at least weekly to maintain our equilibrium. Feeling validated and more relaxed, we go back to our daily lives in Shanghai.

## Conclusion

Culture shock is a common experience among people who spend an extended time in foreign environments. Once they learn the customs, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour in their new culture, the sense of insecurity recedes. This is not to say that culture shock is a fleeting experience. Indeed, foreigners often experience repeated bouts, whenever they encounter unfamiliar situations, or have experiences that they find unacceptable. Nonetheless, culture shock is manageable, and in many ways is a valuable experience that teaches us about ourselves and helps us grow as individuals.

The nature of ethnographic fieldwork means that anthropologists immerse themselves in a culture, interacting on a social level with community members, eating the same food, and participating in various daily activities. As we have seen, this fieldwork generally leads to cultural isolation, feelings of insecurity, and culture shock, but it also leads to insights about human behaviour not possible in a less involved experience. Comparing culture shock to a rite of passage seems apt; it is a period of personal growth and reflects on our ability to learn and accept new and unfamiliar ways of living.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Imagine yourself in a strange place, with no friends or family, language difficulties, only unfamiliar foods to eat ... you get the picture. How would you cope with this new life? Draft an action plan for dealing with culture shock in your adopted country, including coping strategies that you would employ.
2. Examine the phenomenon of reverse culture shock. What problems would you anticipate when returning to your home culture? How would you deal with these problems?
3. Research biculturalism. What advantages can you identify from having a bicultural perspective? What disadvantages?
4. If possible, discuss culture shock with someone who has immigrated to your country. What problems did they encounter when they first arrived and what symptoms of culture shock did they experience?
5. If you moved to another country, would you try to hold on to your cultural practices and values or would you adopt (assimilate) your new country's culture? Depending on your answer to this question, how can you expect any more from people immigrating to your country?



6. Do you think it is possible to completely give up a natal culture and completely immerse oneself in a new culture? Why or why not?

7. Based on the young man from Canada's story, would you say he has passed through all the stages of culture shock? If not, where do you see him in the process of overcoming culture shock? Do you think he will experience reverse culture shock when he returns to North America?

## NOTES

1. Nolan (1990) calls this phase the re-entry crisis.
2. Temporary residents who anticipate returning to their home countries.

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## Suggested Readings

BAKER, V.J. (1998). *A Sinhalese village in Sri Lanka: Coping with uncertainty*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

In this well-written ethnography, readers will not only learn a great deal about the lifestyles of the villagers of Suduwatura Ara, but also about the challenges Baker experienced as a lone anthropologist in a very isolated environment.

DEVITA, P.R. (Ed.). (1992). *The naked anthropologist: Tales from around the world*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

DeVita has put together a collection of stories that recount sometimes embarrassing, sometimes startling experiences of anthropologists in the field. Readers should gain an understanding of the challenges faced by anthropologists as they deal with their insecurities, ignorance, isolation, missteps, and happenstance.

YOUNG, W. (1996). *The Rashaayda Bedouin: Arab pastoralists of Eastern Sudan*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

This book is suggested reading for several reasons: it is one of the very few resources available on the Bedouin; it provides a glimpse into the extraordinary lives of the Rashaayda; and it tells the story of a young anthropologist coming of age.