



Living and Serving in Other Cultures

You probably know already that going to India is not like going to Arizona. When you travel internationally there are differences—food, language, modes of living and transportation—that are easy to identify and talk about. But you need to be aware that there are differences that are much deeper—differences in the way that people see the world, process ideas and make moral judgments.

Seeing through your cultural lens

Culture refers to the total way of life for a particular group of people. It encompasses their assumptions about the world, customs, traditions, language, belief system, social structure and norms. You are the product of your North American culture. There are things that you believe are true, right and normal that have nothing to do with your Christianity and everything to do with your identity as an American student living in the 21st century. You look at the world and process experiences through this cultural lens.

Through your “American student living in the 21st century” lens, the sight of three Indian men sleeping side by side in the same bed is shocking. The men in the bed simply think it is an efficient use of space. Keep in mind that cultural confusion cuts both ways. If you are a young American woman walking down the street in a Muslim country and you try to be friendly by smiling sweetly at the Arab man, you may have, in fact, just invited him to join you in bed.

Anticipating cultural differences

Awareness is the best way to pre-empt being blindsided by cultural differences. Lack of privacy, in particular, can be unnerving to American students. Bathroom facilities, for instance, may not be private, but shared. You may not find a toilet at all, but simply a hole in the ground. When you do find a toilet, you may not find toilet paper.

Worship is an event in many cultures. There may not be only one sermon, but four. Meals can be eventful as well. Be prepared to be adventuresome at the dinner table. Often you will insult your host or hostess if you refuse to share the food from their table—it isn’t always crucial that you know exactly what you are eating or that you like it. *You will find additional cultural differences that rankle many Americans on the next page.*

**“Embrace the culture.
Why did you leave the U.S. if you just want
to bring it with you?”
Emily Bolin, student missionary to Taiwan**

Culture shock

Cultural differences are fascinating—not frightening—so long as you are prepared for them. Find out whatever you can about the culture in which you’ll be working. Be aware that at some point during your overseas experience cultural differences may make you feel uncomfortable or unusually emotional, a condition often termed “cultural fatigue,” or in a more severe manifestation, “culture shock.” In *Lord Foul’s Bane*, Stephen

Donaldson describes it this way, “Culture shock is what happens when you take a man out of his own world and put him down in a place where the assumptions—the standards of being a person—are so different that he can’t possibly understand them.”

Your sense of humor will be your best ally as you cope with cultural fatigue. *You will find additional strategies for handling culture shock on the next page.*

Transcending culture

You will probably be tempted to be critical of cultural differences. Remember that your judgmental attitude can interfere with the work the Holy Spirit intends to do through you. Your mission is not to change the culture of the people you encounter, but to introduce them to Christ. Christ transcends your culture and theirs. The truth of the word of God and the identity of Christ is your common ground.

Pray about ways that cultural differences can be used as a witnessing tool. Casual and oftentimes entertaining discussions about culture, customs and traditions can naturally present an opportunity to share your faith. For instance, it is impossible to talk about the way we celebrate Christmas without mentioning the person of Jesus Christ. Cultural differences are not walls that are impossible to see around and need to be destroyed. Cultural differences are more like open doors leading to conversation, deeper understanding and ultimately, to Christ.

Inducing culture shock

Cultural differences that rankle Americans

The language barrier - Nothing is more frustrating than not being understood. Many Americans travel with the highly offensive notion that everyone, everywhere, should speak English. However, when you travel to another country, you bear the responsibility of trying to make yourself understood. Learning a few key phrases could head off minor disasters.

Privacy- Living in America is all about capitalizing on and demanding our private space. In most other cultures privacy is neither a priority nor a possibility. Prepare to be jammed into buses, to share bathrooms, to give up some of your closely guarded personal space.

Different notions of time - Your watch will probably be the thing you need least on the mission field. Don't be annoyed if NOTHING runs on time—buses, trains, church services, meetings, and cultural events. Relax, kick back and leave your day planner at home.

Mobility - Learn to love public transportation. It is the norm for most places outside the United States. Convenience Not everyone has a microwave, a computer, running water, a telephone, a car, electricity 24 hours a day, a toaster, a hairdryer, instant oatmeal, a can opener, an eyelash curler ... Got the point?

Choice- Don't count on finding 108 brands of cereal— in fact, don't count on finding cereal at all. You'll learn to like rice for breakfast.

Cleanliness- In some cultures people may not be in the habit of bathing daily but weekly or monthly. Standards of cleanliness vary. Did you realize that in many cultures the American habit of wearing street shoes in the house is not only considered rude but is also considered filthy?

Poverty- Very few other countries enjoy the standard of living to which we are accustomed. Many students are grief-stricken by the poverty they see when they travel to developing countries. It may help to remember that material wealth is not always synonymous with happiness. This does not excuse the vast economic inequity that you may witness when you travel; however, it is important to remember that you aren't on mission to share material wealth, but to share the richness of knowing Christ.

Handling culture shock

Living in a cross-cultural environment

You aren't alone. Take comfort in knowing that almost everyone who lives overseas for a substantial period of time experiences culture shock in some form and/or to some degree.

Learn from it. Culture shock stems from an in-depth encounter with another culture in which you learn that there are different ways of doing things that are neither wrong nor inferior. If you meet the shock of cultural differences head on, you can be liberated from the notion that our culture possesses the single right way—the best way—of providing for human needs.

Dig deeper. Consciously look for logical reasons behind everything in the host culture that seems strange, difficult, confusing or threatening. Try to trace every action, habit or idea that you think is "strange" to its underlying value or values.

Look for the silver lining. List the positive things you can identify about your present situation. Avoid bad influences. Stay away from other Americans who may be in a permanent state of culture shock and want to spend their hours commiserating with you.

Laugh at yourself. Inevitably you will make mistakes because of your lack of familiarity with the local culture. Don't be overly sensitive. Your national friends will find your mistakes not only amusing, but also endearing so long as you are a good sport.

Be a friend. Invest yourself in relationships with nationals. Try to develop a deeper, more intimate (not romantic) relationship with one or two people. National friends can help you untangle some of the cultural threads that seem so confusing to you.

Stay busy. Busyness isn't always a form of denial. Keep your mind occupied by getting out into the culture and learning language. Don't lounge around feeling sorry for yourself.

Seek the Lord first. Pray that God will give you a deep appreciation and love for the culture. Pray that He will open your eyes to see where and how He is working.