

CULTURE SHOCK AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

By Annie Bartlett

In many ways the local customs and courtesies (overseas) are different from the traditional good manners of a western culture. We tend to think that basic good manners and etiquette are universally understood and practised in the same way; we may not realise that what constitutes good manners in one society may have exactly the opposite effect in another.

Good manners are really the basic consideration for the feelings of another person. If we care about someone, we try to understand their customs, etiquette, local courtesies, and the rules that regulate the conduct of their daily life. This is one of the best ways of establishing a basis for friendship and cooperation. This does not mean that we must relinquish our own standards of manners, values, beliefs and attitudes; we need only expand them in the name of friendship and goodwill.

Sometimes we may feel that something is not going well, that our message does not seem to be getting across, that a misunderstanding has occurred and we don't know why. We find that major behaviour cues are being missed and that assumptions on one side of the interaction are not being met by the otherside. This is commonly known as "culture shock"; it is experienced by most travellers....when visiting or living in a foreign country. While trying to signal friendship, we may be: touching when we should not be touching; wearing shorts when we should be covered up; inadvertently making 'obscene' gestures in front of a host's wife and children; offering gifts that are associated with death and funerals and communicating distress rather than joy; patting child's head without realising that many prayers will be necessary to remove the bad luck associated with that gesture. A person in "culture shock" often does not realise why things are going wrong, but t times like these they are aware that culture is very real and that all people are not bound by universal patterns of understanding.

What is the Meaning of Culture Shock?

The term "shock" when used in relation to culture shock means: impact; a sudden and disturbing physical or mental impression; a disturbance in the equilibrium of something.

Culture shock is "...a state of stress and anxiety that results from the disturbing impressions we get and the loss of equilibrium we feel when we lose all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and when we encounter physical and environmental differences in an alien culture". (J. Craig, - "Culture Shock", Times Books International, 1979 Singapore.)

There is an assumption made by people that "culture shock" involves, to some degree, being "shocked". I thin it is far more subtle than that, and more complex – almost intangible.

Not only are volunteers being placed in another, very different, culture, where you might expect to be “culture shocked”, you are being, in some cases, “self-shocked”. Even people, who have travelled extensively or lived for periods of overseas, experience this. What I mean by “self-shocked” is that you are suddenly confronted with responses which, in theory, are not considered appropriate to any environment, quite apart from a third world environment – anger, frustration, boredom, fury, pity – as well as other feelings which, although more acceptable, are compounded – loneliness, lack of confidence, fragility, sensitivity, and insecurity.

I think it was a measure of my insecurity in my first six months as a volunteer when never once did I allow myself to become angry – I was afraid that my students wouldn’t like me for it, and that I would offend them, yet anger is a natural emotion and rather than suppress it, I should have given expression to it. Of course, one of the most important factors in any relationship is how emotions are expressed, and expression of an emotion can be either constructive or destructive.

The suppression of emotions is one of the easiest traps to fall into overseas. It is so easy for you to argue against being angry, frustrated or bored when living amongst strangers – the risk of offence being upper-most in your thinking. It is, in a sense, a form of paternalism and it can be extremely destructive not only in terms of your relationship to others, but also in terms of your relationship to yourself. If you begin to suppress emotions you lose touch with them, and that is dangerous.

It is easy to say here “act naturally” – what could be easier! It’s difficult to put that into practice overseas.

Unfortunately conflicts arise. Why is it that I am angry with this person who is not angry in response? Why is it I am bored when there is so much going on of a vastly different nature? Why is it that I feel lonely when there are so many people around me? How can I feel depressed when everyone else seems too happy? Why is it that I am worried sick and no-one else seems to be? Why is it I feel frustrated with what is happening or not happening when I realise that this is the way things happen here?

It is important for volunteers to begin, even before leaving Australia, to practice the art of distancing yourselves from your emotions in order to begin to see those emotions in perspective. To be able to look at yourselves and say “yes, I am depressed (or angry or frustrated....)” and not feel guilty about being so.

Accept the emotion and work through it much as you would do in your own environment, and understand that the fact you are in a strange environment is going to have a distorting effect. Without the support, friendships, familiarity you have experienced and relied on here, you can become more vulnerable and destabilised emotionally in a much shorter time. Small frustrations become enormous and small issues that are easily dismissed here, become crucial over there. A little setback becomes cause for a great depression.

It is not possible to say, “do this and you won’t suffer your culture shock or whatever”. There is no preventative medicine. What can be undertaken, however, are a number of strategies to minimise it.

The most important thing is to be comfortable with the notion that you are going as a volunteer for your own reasons, for your own self. Motivation and reasons for going amongst any group of volunteers are disparate. Believe in your own reasons for going.

Don’t feel under pressure to perform. “It is the being rather than the doing”. It is difficult to arrive in a placement where there are volunteers who have already been there a year, either from another organisation or from your own, and not feel pressured. There seems to be, in those first few months, a mountain of experience to climb. It can be very paralysing – “Where do I being?”

It can be difficult too, when two volunteers are placed together and there is a sense of performance comparison. You have learnt five words of the language but your fellow volunteer is already into sentences; or where you work is not as ‘close to grass roots’ or something similar. To learn the language, make friends; understand the nature of the work takes time. It is important to take it easy. Perhaps you will not learn a word of the language in the first six months; perhaps you will not feel you have found a real friend in the first six months; perhaps you will feel you still have not come to grips with your work. And perhaps those feelings, and others, will persist right up until the time you leave. Don’t feel that they in some way single you out as being unsuccessful. You can only do and learn so much – and you must come to terms with yourself and your limitations in this respect.

Equally difficult are the expectations placed upon you by the local people because of the presence of a volunteer prior to your arrival. “Denise did it this way; Denise did it that way...” endless comparisons which do nothing to add to your feelings of security.

What you must be constantly aware of is that you are – there for your own reasons, taking things at your own pace and doing things your own way.

I remember feeling grossly “Behind” in that other volunteers I knew of in the area had learnt the language already and I was still struggling with the first few words. I put myself under a lot of unnecessary pressure to catch up, and consequently felt burnt out four months later. The novelty of being in a new environment was also wearing off at about that stage and the realisation was dawning that I had another 20 months to go. I ended up feeling depressed and miserable – and reluctant to admit it to myself because I thought, “How can I be?”

There are times during the first 6 – 12 months when a volunteer can feel particularly vulnerable and fragile – very sensitive to things which go wrong, almost paranoid. The fact you are singled out as being different – white, big nosed, tall, hairy armed, blue-eyed – can give a volunteer the feeling of living in a gold fish bowl. Many eyes upon you, yet no one looking directly.

A great deal depends on initial experiences and a volunteer can put a great deal of effort into making those experiences good – yet end up defeated by a small miscalculation or misunderstanding. I think you have to say, when you make mistakes, “Yes, that was a mistake”, and begin again. I found it easier to “write-off” whole days, even weeks, when things went wrong and begin again – not forgetting lessons learnt, but erasing the mortification and not allowing it to affect my days following.

I think the worst mistakes are not those you make and realise immediately when you still have an opportunity to retrieve your dignity, but those mistakes you realise you’ve made a day or a week ago, when it suddenly comes to light that you have offended someone. You may not realise mistakes you have made until you leave your assignment. Ah! The shame of it all! Accept the inevitability of mistakes, accept the inevitability of blushing mortification, and begin again.

In the first six months I think it is important to be expectation-less. Watch, listen and wait. I like to believe that people will come to you if they are interested in you, want to work with you and be friends with you. You have already expressed your interest by arriving. Wait for approaches from others. Spend the first six months finding out about yourself – asking yourself how you feel and trying to answer why you feel that way. Recoup some of the emotional and physical energy it has taken to leave Australia. Big decisions have been made you probably won’t suffer from a backlash until, sometime after arrival, the realisation dawns that you have ‘arrived’. I remember wandering around the briefing in Melbourne thinking and saying, “this is all a big joke – it’s not real” – it wasn’t until four months or so later I realised it wasn’t a joke!

Set yourself up so that you can be yourself – mindful of the situation and cultural environment in which you find yourself. It is important on the one hand that you do not lose sight of yourself, that you continue to live according to the way in which you feel comfortable and, on the other hand, that you do not lose sight of the fact that you are in a different culture and to be respectful and mindful of it. I faced a dilemma in that I smoke and in my area young women did not. I certainly wasn’t prepared to give up, but at the same time did not wish to offend. I compromised by smoking only in my house or when invited to do so by older women. That way I was able to please others and myself. It was the same with drinking.

It is important to have the ability to laugh at yourself and develop the ability to cope with being laughed at by others. Often you will find that laughter is a means not of ridicule, but of covering embarrassment, showing sympathy, disguising shyness, or hiding ignorance. If someone is laughing at you, it could be that he/she is shy, cannot understand what you have said, or is embarrassed. Don’t assume that it’s because he/she is happy or is ridiculing you. Don’t assume anything!

I suppose, lastly, you must remember that you are in a sense going not so much to teach, or do, but to learn. It takes sensitivity, patience, at times and acceptance without explanation, humility in being able to listen and admit you are wrong, and a sense of humour.