

The Rotary Youth Exchange Experience: The Middle Wave of Culture Shock

by Dennis White, Ph.D.

Rotary Youth Exchange Students who departed for their host countries in late August are in the middle of their fourth month abroad around Christmas time. Despite the fact that most of them are having a very positive experience, this is a time when it is fairly typical for many of them to be experiencing a second “wave” of culture shock, longer and more difficult than that which they experienced upon arrival in their host country. When viewed from a psychological-intercultural point of view, there are some interesting challenges. What kind of experiences might they be having as they deal with becoming more immersed in their host cultures, as they deal with the subtleties of language and the progression of culture shock?

Most exchange students in year-long programs go through a fairly identifiable progression of adjustment to culture shock, although each student’s experience is unique. It should also be noted that while culture shock can be very uncomfortable, there is nothing wrong with it, or with the person experiencing it. And it is also quite common for students to be having a very positive and rewarding experience, despite having on-going adjustment problems with culture shock.

There are usually at least four stages that exchange students experience. It is quite common for these stages to repeat themselves as the students become more and more successfully immersed in the host culture. These stages are:

- 1. Excitement and Enthusiasm.** This is the feeling of excitement and enthusiasm that accompanies travel to a new place, seeing and doing so many new and different things, and meeting new people. It is most prominent at the beginning of the exchange year, but can repeat itself as students continue to have new experiences, like changing host families, meeting new students, or continued travel. Sometimes it can be the excitement that comes from developing a new skill or increased understanding of the host culture.
- 2. Irritability.** This is the stage most readily associated with culture shock and occurs when the initial excitement wears off and real differences become evident. These are differences that go beyond food and language, and they are often indescribable to the person experiencing them. No matter how understanding and accepting the student may try to be, there will be many times when they just don’t like or understand why their host culture is the way it is, and they can’t seem to make the feeling go away. Irritability can come at any time that a student is confronted with differences they may not have experienced or perceived previously.
- 3. Adaptation.** This is the longest, most difficult and most rewarding stage. This is when students learn to accept that they will have to adapt if they are going to be successful in their host culture. They work at adapting to customs and habits that they may not understand, and may not like. Sometimes even when they try very hard, they have difficulty, because so much of this adaptation depends on learning the native language. They know they are adjusting when they begin to think and speak using idiomatic expressions (expressions that have meaning beyond a literal translation). They know they are adjusting when they notice that they are doing things without thinking, and these are the very things they never thought they could become comfortable with. An example would be when someone from a very formal culture becomes comfortable standing very close to other people, frequently touching them and being touched, during a conversation. Adaptation is a continuous process, but

requires more attention when some of these newly discovered differences become apparent to the student.

4. Biculturalism. This stage comes very near the end of the stay, or sometimes doesn't really emerge until the student returns to their native country. This is when they realize that they have become competent in another culture, and can see the world and function from another, very different point of view. When this stage emerges toward the end of the exchange year, it all seems very unfair to the student. Just as they are getting to experience the benefits of really knowing how to function well in their host culture, they have to go back home.

In **Table 1** below, a model of a typical year of adaptation and culture shock adjustment is pictured. The bold line that waves up and down represents the high and low feelings that students experience as they go through the various stages of adjustment to culture shock. The lowest point comes at about four months, or near the middle of December. For Christian students, this also coincides with what is probably the first Christmas they have spent away from their families. As a result, there is a sort of double negative of culture shock and homesickness.

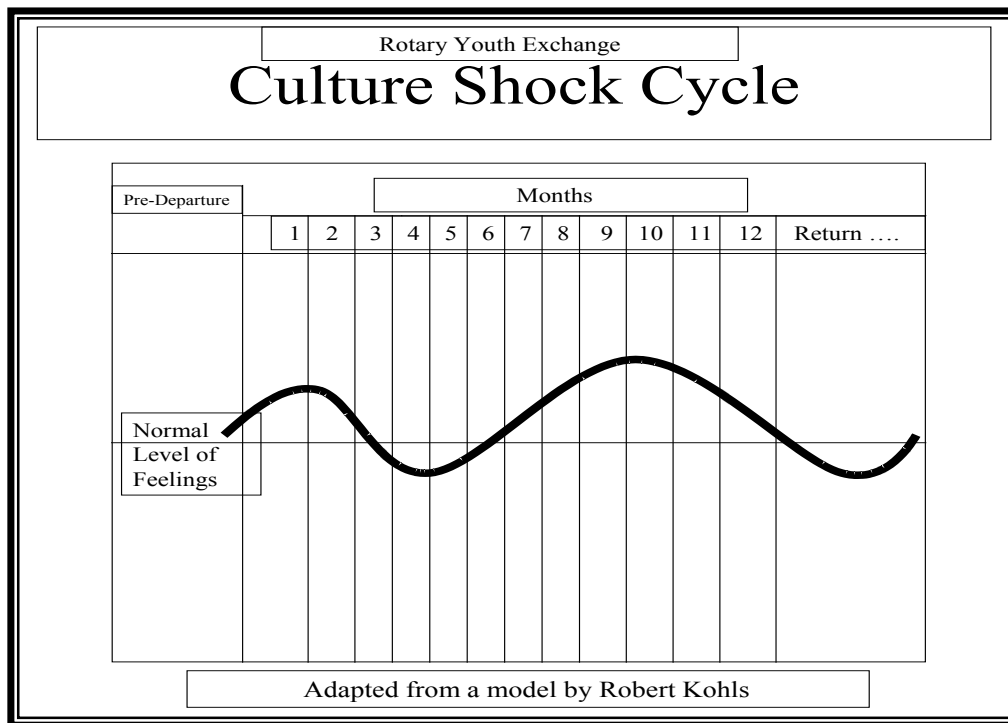


Table 1.

What exactly is the student experiencing at this point? Most of them tell us that this is where the feeling of irritability is at its greatest, because they do not see an easy way to feel better. They have already adapted to the things that are the easiest to adapt to. They have learned to live with the food, even though they may not really like it. Or they may have learned to like it more than they ever expected. But they have not necessarily figured out how to get along better with a host family, or to be included more in school activities. They may not know yet how to deal with differences in attitudes toward the sexes, or negative attitudes toward their native country's political activities.

Most probably, and certainly most importantly, they may have not yet learned enough language to really understand what is going on, or to communicate what they want to say to others. After a few months of this, it is very natural to get very frustrated and wish that everyone and everything just made more sense. It is also not likely that the student really understands that this is what is happening. They may just experience it as a global feeling of discomfort and dislike of the culture. Instead of saying “I’m hitting that low point of irritability in adjusting to culture shock”, they are more likely to say “I don’t like this place, these people, etc.”

At this point, they are just entering the longest, but most rewarding of the four stages of culture shock. Looking again at Table 1., we see that the eventual high that is achieved is actually higher than the first high that came in Stage 1., the initial Excitement Stage. This is where the students not only learn much more language and understand the culture much more. It is where they begin to learn much more about themselves. They get a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. They learn new coping skills or use existing ones that they may never have known they had. They may learn to enjoy reading, or traveling in their city by themselves. They may develop hobbies like writing or playing a musical instrument. They may learn to initiate activities with other people that they may have thought themselves too shy to try.

It is the beginning of an exciting time, and a period where the time just seems to fly by. In three or four months they will be facing the reality that they will be returning home in a very short time, and it will come far too soon – just when they are getting really skilled as an exchange student. But at the beginning of this period, it is still fairly difficult, and it can be discouraging.

It can be helpful if Youth Exchange Officers/Counselors and parents understand that this is what many students are going through at this time. They can be supportive of students first by acknowledging that it is normal and ok to be going through a low period at this time. They need to be reassured that there is nothing wrong with them or the host country just because they are feeling this way. It can be extremely helpful to a student in this stage to just have someone with whom they can express their feelings without fear of getting in trouble or offending anyone. It can also be helpful to point out to the student that this is probably the lowest point they will experience, and that things will begin to get better as they continue to work at adjusting. It won’t be easy, but it is worth it.

The exchange experience can at times be compared to riding waves on a surfboard, with lots of ups and downs. The time from mid-December until about mid-March is the middle wave. If the student can hang on and stick with it, this longest of waves will crest at the top higher than they ever imagined possible.

About the author:

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