

I. Introduction

You are on a journey. Coming to the United States may be considered the journey of a lifetime! You had your life to live in your home country and you also had your dreams of competing academically in a foreign setting. You had familiar surroundings that gave you security and comfort and yet you longed for new adventures and new experiences to stretch your wings and your imagination.

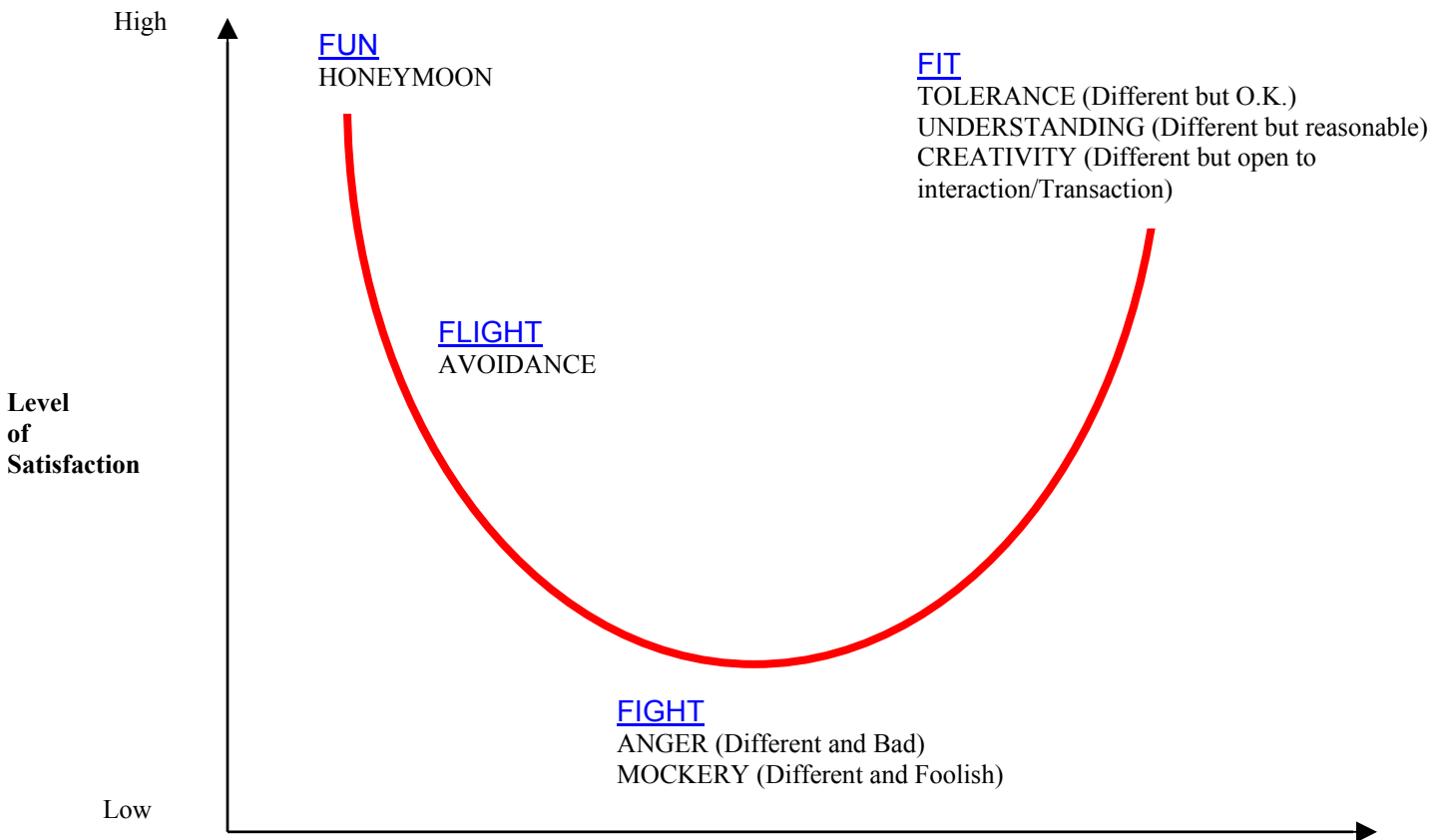
Your journey is different because of your background and experience. You have a point of reference or a “mental map” you call your culture. This “mental map” is an integrated set of beliefs, ideas, and products that shape the way you live, evaluate your life, and interpret the lives of others around you.

When your “mental map” meets the American “mental map” you find yourself in a state of adventure, confusion, frustration, and self-discovery. This new cross-cultural experience brings out questions like -- How do you go about your journey into the American way of doing things? What map should you follow to understand the language and thinking of your American professors, classmates, and friends?

Those who have studied cross-cultural travelers have discovered that they seem to follow a particular path or pattern. They have identified certain stages that travelers go through.

II. The Cross-Cultural Path — The U-Curve

STAGES OF TRANSITION



Transition may bring a series of ups and downs. There may be two or more high and low points. This model shows only a segment of what one feels when entering a new culture. The feelings spread themselves out for those who are staying for a longer period of time and contracts for the short-termer.

Multiple and simultaneous “U” curves may be experienced in transition. Adjustment in academic work may look different form social or emotional involvement. Plotting one’s spiritual journey may also show a different curve. Awareness of the many levels of adjustment helps in understanding one’s transition.

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Your cross-cultural experience is essentially confronting and making sense of what is different around you.

FUN Stage - Different is Great and Wonderful

You go through this initial stage of wide-eyed excitement where everything is new, pleasant, and nice. It may be the simple and efficient way that systems work, the clean surroundings or the quality of professors and research facilities you have.

Or it may just be simple freedom that makes the transition to the United States a wonderful experience! Or it may be the joy of being by yourself with no parents to watch and control your life and no social structures to answer to (even temporarily). Or this stage is fun because of the wonderful people you meet who impress you with their informality and generosity. Aside from the modern gadgets of life you also appreciate the abundant and inexpensive foods available to you (even if they are bland to your spicy taste buds)

This stage is full of the new and the wonderful.

FLIGHT Stage - Different and Unpleasant

A new feeling sets in at this stage. The wear and tear of cross-cultural living is showing its toll. What used to fascinate you may no longer invite the initial response of wonderment. Instead, you may find yourself confused and dissatisfied, alone and distant to your new world. You may find yourself avoiding contact with the American people or the American system.

The common phrase to describe this feeling is "Culture shock" - it is the emotional response to the newness of the environment which is sometimes accompanied by physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness, and even nausea.

The expected response of the traveler at this stage is that of avoidance. You pull away from the stress of cross-cultural living by staying in your room, being by yourself, or by just staying with your own people.

You will also find yourself emotionally "flying" back home. Wishing you could be back home is a nice thought to entertain at this stage. You are beginning to say to yourself and even to others, "I do not like this place."

FIGHT Stage- Different and Bad; Different and Foolish

At this stage things are not looking up. You may start to say "I hate this place." You may find yourself at the bottom of the U-curve. The things you see and experience all point to the negative aspect of your journey to this country. During this period, you may discover that the people are not as nice as you thought they were, or you feel misunderstood and embarrassed. Perhaps your English is not improving as fast as you want, or your professor may be insensitive to your needs, or you have not made any friend yet, and to top it all, winter has set in and you are lonely and even angry.

Your anger may be directed to the system, the people, or the culture. You will experience these bouts of anger because what you have seen is different and you have concluded these differences are also bad. Additionally, you may also be tempted to mock and make fun of the new culture and the way people do things.

BUT remember this is only a stage- hopefully a temporary state of mind and feelings.

FIT Stage – Different but OK; Different but Reasonable; Different but Open to Interaction/Transaction

This is the hopeful stage. With time, patience, perseverance, and the help of new friends you will find yourself feeling better about your new environment and about yourself.

You will find yourself more tolerant of the many new things around you. It does not mean you approve of those things, but it means you are able to accept them as part of the new culture. You will also begin to discover the bigger picture of the new culture and the reason why Americans do what they do. As you see their values, attitudes, and behavior in the context of their culture, you are able to understand more and criticize less. In addition, you will also find yourself more open and ready to new ideas and ways of doing things. As you engage in the life on campus and the community, your confidence in living, interacting, and contributing to your new culture increases.

HOW LONG MAY THIS WHOLE PROCESS TAKE? A psychologist, who has studied and seen cross-cultural travelers, has said that it can take from 6 months to a year.

III. Your responses

Your response to the challenge of cultural living may be one or a combination of imitation, isolation or integration. You will need to imitate the ways of the new culture in order to enter their world. This imitation does not mean embracing everything about the new culture. It is more a selective imitation where you copy at the level that is comfortable to you (conscience-approved – what is consistent with and closer to your own values and beliefs). You also imitate and follow the generally accepted procedure and behavior in your new social circles. As you learn through following the local people, you begin to understand and appreciate the actual cultural behaviors and the meanings behind them.

Isolation is another response where you pull away (physically and emotionally) from cross-cultural encounters. You distance yourself from events that call for heavy interaction with the nationals or a greater cultural leap on your part (e.g. participating in class or answering the phone). As you pull away from such encounters you will find comfort in being with your own people, speaking your language and eating your common food. Isolation is healthy to keep your cultural and emotional balance but it becomes unproductive when it keeps you from learning from your cross-cultural experience. However, unguarded isolation can also lead to intense loneliness and even depression.

Integration is mixing with the culture. You feel safe and comfortable in your new world. Your confidence leads you to contribute to your new culture through participation in events, sharing of ideas in discussions, and even cooking your favorite food for others.

Over time you will feel more secure about who you are and your place in your new culture. You may still feel like an outsider and yet you know that you have the respect and trust of your hosts and new friends. There will be cultural tensions along the way, but you are learning a new culture, acquiring a new set of skills, and maturing in your understanding of your self and the world.

Remember that learning a culture takes time. Observe, ask questions, experiment with new cultural ways of doing things, and experience the great lessons of cross-cultural living.

BUT the following things are key:

1. Understand that you are in transition. Be kind and gentle to yourself.
2. Find a friend who can explain the American cultural road map to you.
3. Remember that your transition is many-layered -- academic, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, political, and financial. Some areas of transition may be easier than others.
4. Enjoy your journey with a good sense of humor and a great sense of learning and adventure.

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