

Coping with Anxiety and Rebuilding Identity: A Psychosynthesis Approach to Culture Shock*

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Introduction

Culture shock is a well-known term used to define the initial experiences of immersion in an unfamiliar culture. Kalvero Oberg (1960) first defined culture shock as involving two processes: (1) contact with or immersion in a different culture; and (2) loss of the safety net of predictable social roles, cues, and practices. Since Oberg's identification of culture shock, there have been numerous contributions to its study, models, causes and prevention. Besides finding oneself in a stressful situation, a person undergoing culture shock can experience adjustment strain (Crano & Crano, 1993), acculturative stress (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987) and even grief and bereavement for significant others left behind (Ward et al., 2001).

Contemporary theories and approaches to culture shock are currently based on its affective, behavioral and cognitive components, referred to as the ABC framework of culture shock (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). The *affect* aspect of culture shock revolves around the significance of life changes during cross-cultural transitions, the appraisal of these changes, and the application of coping strategies to deal with inherently stressful situations that automatically arise when living in a foreign country. Intervention methods for the affect component of culture shock include stress management skills to help the foreign visitor develop coping strategies and tactics (e.g., Zhou et al., 2008).

The *behavior* aspect of culture shock is based on the theory of cultural learning (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Researchers who adopt a cultural learning approach see intercultural contact as a skilled and mutually organized performance (Argyle, 1969). This model leads to practical guidelines for changing behavior in order to manage the "shock" which is seen as the stimulus for acquiring new culture-specific skills that are needed to engage in unfamiliar social situations. Cultural learning includes an understanding of the attitudes and behaviors in the host country with regard to social skills such as gift-giving, etiquette, conflict resolution, and non-verbal communication like bodily contact and mutual gaze (Ward et al., 2001). Intervention methods include pre-trip preparation, especially behavioral-based social skills training (Zhou et al., 2008).

The *cognitive* aspect of culture shock is anchored in the theory of social identification, where identity is the fundamental issue for cross-cultural travelers (Ward et al., 2001). During cross-cultural contact, people suddenly find themselves in a much broader context which can lead to anxiety-provoking change in how they perceive themselves and their identity (Zhou et al., 2008). Intervention guidelines for the cognitive component of culture shock include techniques for enhancing self-esteem, the establishment of inter-group harmony, and emphasizing inter-group similarities (Zhou et al., 2008). From the cognitive point-of-view, Ward et al. (2001) present four alternatives for people facing culture shock:

- 1) Remain staunchly monocultural in their traditions of origin.
- 2) Assimilate totally, and identify monoculturally with the host country.
- 3) Synthesize the best elements of both cultures and become bicultural.
- 4) Vacillate between cultures, identifying with neither (p. 272).

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Anderson (1994, p. 305) similarly states that the cross-cultural traveler has four ways of reacting to the new environment:

- (1) change the environment
- (2) change oneself
- (3) do nothing
- (4) walk away

A psychosynthesis approach to such decisions attempts to accept the challenge of Anderson's second choice in order to achieve the goal of Ward et al.'s third alternative.

A psychosynthesis approach to culture shock

Despite psychosynthesis having the possibility of providing an inclusive view of the skills, coping mechanisms, attitudes and abilities required to intervene and manage culture shock, the psychosynthesis approach remains missing from the research literature. Whether by chance, circumstance, or an unconscious or conscious act of will, all international students choose to leave what they outwardly think of as home to reinvent their lives on foreign soil. Giddens (1991) argues that away from the routines and rituals associated with home, individuals come face-to-face with disturbing existential questions and the threat of personal meaninglessness. Stripped of their familiar identity and way of life, student sojourners are often forced to face inner struggles that have previously remained buried. Feelings of loneliness and emptiness can emerge, questions about past relationships or work choices are raised, and even deeper, childhood traumas can suddenly appear in need of attention and healing. Psychosynthesis concepts and techniques have the potential to provide a comprehensive and integrative approach to managing the inner and outer struggles experienced by foreigners living in a host country.

The aim of this study was to ascertain if the two psychosynthesis techniques of the self-identification exercise and subpersonality model might help international students in the Netherlands to intervene and manage the ABCs of culture shock. The following results are presented through the case study of Maria. Maria's narrative was chosen to demonstrate the findings because: (1) her process best represents the processes of the other student sojourners, (2) her inner and outer journey best illustrates the psychosynthesis process, and (3) she was most able to articulate her experience. Please refer to the entire published article for further details on the research methodology, including the participants, data collection and analysis, techniques employed, a comprehensive explanation of the subpersonality integration process as well as other client results that support the findings of this study. Please note that all clients were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and Maria has granted her permission to quote her in this article and publish her drawings.

Easing the affect component of culture shock with the self-identification exercise

Maria's presenting issues were depression and feelings of being sad, lost, and unhappy. In addition, Maria was having a difficult time relating to her Dutch PhD supervisor. Midway through her PhD, she was considering returning home:

I just don't identify with Dutch culture—its values, even its food. I've completed all the Dutch language courses, but still can't understand the morning news. After three years here, I just feel done with it. Especially the weather.

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The counselor's initial task was to provide Maria a technique for managing and coping with stress. During the first sessions, Maria was led through the self-identification exercise. After six sessions, she sent the following email:

I feel stronger now with all the things I discovered about myself and also calmer and safer.

Subpersonalities and the cognitive component of culture shock

Once Maria started to feel less disorientated, more supported, and, hence, more grounded in her reality, she could then move towards the more challenging work of reconstructing her personal identity into a newer and more authentic way of being through the subpersonality process. Results showed that the fact of living in a foreign country appeared to be the "shock" that such subpersonalities needed to become dislodged and less dominant in a student's life.

Rebuilding a student sojourner's identity

During her second session, Maria identified two conflicting, polar subpersonalities: Miss Victorious and Miss Silent (Figure 1). Miss Victorious wanted to control all situations and to be the best. She needed recognition and could operate in the rational world with great success. Miss Silent was sensitive, deeply emotional, and more creative. She wanted acceptance of who she was, and needed safety, space and time alone.



Figure 1. Miss Victorious and Miss Silent.
(Drawing by client).

Miss Victorious, the more dominant subpersonality, was the one who propelled Maria through her scientific studies and managed her success in the outer world. But, by constantly wanting control, Miss Victorious left little space for Miss Silent. Part of Maria's unconscious reason for entering counseling was to give Miss Silent

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the space she was inwardly demanding. The reason Maria initially felt depressed, sad, lost and unhappy was her not recognizing and accepting the needs of Miss Silent, compounded by the limitations of always operating as Miss Victorious.

Maria agreed to more closely explore the origin of these two subpersonalities and found that both had developed very early. Maria is the first born of three daughters to parents who, while attentive caregivers, also carried psychological wounds from their own childhood. As a young woman, Maria's mother attended university but did not finish her studies. As a result, Maria's mother emotionally related to Maria almost entirely around her education. In addition, when Maria was born, her father explicitly expressed disappointment that she was not a son. Parental love and acceptance, therefore, depended upon, for the most part, high academic achievement. Maria is gifted intellectually and strong willed, so she was able to excel in school. However, her deeper emotional life and sensitivity was forced underground as Miss Silent. Here we clearly see the promise that the infant Maria made to her parents: "I will be victorious in all that I do" and the promise made to herself: "I will hide the more emotional, sensitive side of myself from the world." When Maria made these promises in order to survive in her familial environment, she broke her connection with the Self—which is a synthesis of the higher qualities of the two subpersonalities (amongst others).

The higher qualities that each of the subpersonalities held were also explored. The higher qualities carried by Miss Victorious were trustworthiness, dependability, will, initiative and persistence. And the higher qualities of Miss Silent were creativity, intuition, and wisdom. Living away from her home and country, facing scholastic challenges and difficult relationship issues with her supervisor only augmented and mirrored Maria's disconnection from Self. Through recognizing, accepting, and dis-identifying from her Miss Victorious and Miss Silent subpersonalities, Maria was eventually able to reconnect with each subpersonality's higher qualities. This process of integration was aided by a visualization in which the two subpersonalities dialogued with each other alongside Maria as an observer. During the dialogue, both Miss Victorious and Miss Silent expressed their unique needs and by the end of the visualization, Miss Victorious had become more humble and vulnerable and Miss Silent more assertive. Afterwards, Maria drew the two subpersonalities in reconciliation, kneeling before each other, holding hands and smiling (Figure 2).

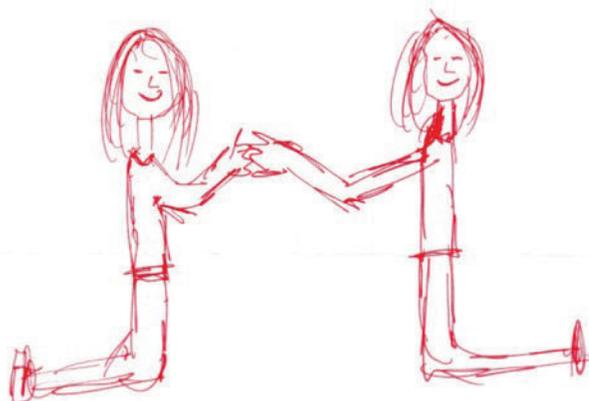


Figure 2. Reconciliation leading to synthesis of Miss Victorious and Miss Silent.
(Drawing by client).

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Reflecting on her drawing, Maria said:

Miss Silent has hope now. She trusts Miss Victorious. Miss Victorious has to create space for Miss Silent. She has to be silent also. Patient. Not so anxious about things. They go good together. They should do this more often!

The counseling work continued around balancing, coordinating, and integrating these two subpersonalities as well as other challenges during the year including the pain and sadness around Maria's "childhood promise" to herself and her parents. One example of Maria's continual integration of her subpersonalities occurred when she created a space in her home called her "temple" where she started to paint and meditate. Through this new endeavor, her Miss Silent subpersonality was allowed to fulfill her needs of safety, space, and time alone in a new way, and hence integrate more fully with Miss Victorious. This new approach also enabled Miss Silent's higher quality of creativity to be expressed in a more conscious and harmonious way.

Changing behavior and releasing creative energy

As Maria was more able to objectively recognize her subpersonalities, she could better direct them from a stronger center of her personal "I," choosing what role was most appropriate in any given situation. Consequently, her behavior changed as evidenced by her new ability to engage in relationship with others and even the pursuit of her PhD. By the time she finished her meetings, Maria had come into a working relationship with her supervisor, successfully finished her PhD, married, was better able to relate to her parents, and was offered a post-doctoral position within the university.

Ultimately, by working through the subpersonality process, Maria and the other students were able to reconcile polarities that they faced in the outer world. As they identified and then dis-identified from the roles that they played during the day, they were more present and able to choose the most appropriate role at the most appropriate time, even in an unfamiliar cultural landscape. Consequently, all students were able to engage with others more effectively, assess and express their own needs and wants, and execute clearer decisions

In addition to positive behavioral change and personal growth, students' stymied energies moved towards their full human potential. Maslow (1970) has also noted that "creativity . . . seemed to be an epiphenomenon of . . . greater wholeness and integration" (p. 141). He writes that "the extent that creativeness is constructive, synthesizing, unifying, and integrative, . . . depends in part on the inner integration of the person" (p. 140). Maria was no exception, as shown in her following reflection:

I feel like I was on hold for the past year. Waiting. Like my life was on hold. Not knowing for what. Just having faith. I was busy, but I was questioning why I was doing the PhD. And it felt like there was no clear path. Also in my personal life. Then things started to develop when I started to look for clarity. Things started to unblock. The data came, my personal life improved.

It's incredible how much energy is consumed by doubts and feelings of sadness. How much energy is consumed by being someone else. I want to be seen for who I am, not just for who I'm expected to be. Now, I have more creative energy. It's more "green" to be myself! I see the postdoc that I want. And I have the energy to grab it. And it feels exciting and so much better.

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Discussion

This case study illustrates how two psychosynthesis techniques were applied to intervene, relieve and transform the effects of the ABC components of culture shock experienced by a student sojourner in the Netherlands. The student sought psychosynthesis counseling as a result of the stress and anxiety triggered by her living in a foreign environment. Through these stressful situations, her personal identity was challenged and forced to develop and transform. With a new, more authentic identity, the student was then able to direct her behavior and successfully meet the challenges presented by the ABC aspects of culture shock.

This research indicates that the psychosynthesis self-identification exercise and subpersonality model might provide an effective intervention for the ABCs of culture shock for international students. As such, these tools could be offered as part of the larger multicultural training program for both international students and university counselors and staff. Establishing an acculturation program for student sojourners does not only entail constructing a website that can instruct student sojourners on the academic protocol, social conventions, and local services in their host country. As Brown and Holloway (2008b) point out, we have a moral and educational duty to take international students' specific circumstances into account and provide them with long-term solutions. In their ethnographic study (2008a), they also conclude that, while it may be appropriate at times for international students to focus on the acquisition of appropriate behavior and skills, university counselors and pastoral staff also need to better understand the complexity of the adjustment process. With a more comprehensive perspective, support personnel could then better consider each student's individual needs and circumstances when deciding how he or she might best be supported.

Psychosynthesis counseling and training focuses on such challenges by aiding students' with their individual needs, helping them to acquire appropriate behavior and skills, and dealing with complexity of the adjustment process through various techniques and models. Psychosynthesis can also enable student sojourners to come closer to their own personal consciousness and will and, consequently, more easily in touch with their own wants, needs, emotions, intuitions, and imagination. Gradually, student sojourners can become directors of their diverse subpersonalities and more freely and consciously choose and execute their daily actions. This is the real goal of any acculturation project – to learn how to maintain one's identity, self-esteem, and psychological well-being while at the same time interacting in a constructive way within a society that maintains a world view different from one's own.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to ascertain if two psychosynthesis techniques—the self-identification exercise and the subpersonality model—might help international students in the Netherlands to intervene and manage the ABCs of culture shock. The self-identification exercise allowed students, as exemplified in this case study, to deal with the affect component of culture shock, namely stress and anxiety. During subsequent sessions, students were then guided to integrate their subpersonalities and hence manage identity conflicts (the cognitive component of ABC). As students were able to feel calmer and grow in awareness with regard to their subpersonalities, in psychosynthesis terms, each student began to synthesize into a more authentic personality. As a result of this personal synthesis, their behavior (the second ABC component) changed and new creative energies were released.

Ultimately, this study illustrates the effective results of psychosynthesis and, in particular, the self-identification exercise and subpersonality process when applied to student sojourners and their experience of

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culture shock. Most international students have particularly intense emotional experiences at the start of their studies as they must adapt, not only to a new environment, but also to unfamiliar academic protocol and procedures (Brown, 2009). But at the same time, these young students also have a powerful opportunity for transformation, a chance to glimpse and grasp their full potential, and search for deeper meaning in their lives (Anderson, 1994; Lombard, 2012). Those who have accepted, integrated, and ultimately synthesized the challenges posed by adapting to a foreign culture inevitably deepen and broaden their relationship with themselves and, consequently, are more able to engage fruitfully with others who hold different world views. Psychosynthesis concepts and techniques are not only potentially effective and inclusive tools for adapting to a host country, but also viable methodologies for anyone searching to synthesize a new personal and social identity. ■

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