

Finding your feet in

Upon arriving in the Netherlands as an international student it may take a while to find your feet. Former UT Nieuws journalist and Psychosynthesis coach Catherine Lombard highlights this process of adaptation in her new book *From Culture Shock to Personal Transformation: Studying Abroad and the Search for Meaning*.

TEXT: MARLOES VAN AMEROM | PHOTO: GIJS VAN OUWERKERK >

How many people do you estimate suffer from cultural adaptation problems at the UT?

That's a good question, and one that I would like to investigate. Currently, little research exists that examines the adaptation of international university students in the Netherlands. But other studies have clearly shown that nearly all international students encounter an array of acculturation stressors – the language barrier, educational environment, practical and lifestyle changes, academic protocol and even discrimination. I would say, based on my experience, that nearly all international students experience and suffer from cultural shock. But not everyone is willing or able to address his or her feelings and experience.

In your book you suggest that solutions to overcoming a cultural shock should also include a spiritual component. Can you say a bit more on this?

By spiritual, I mean a personal search for meaning in your life, the feeling of being connected to others and the world around you, and the ability to experience deeper relationships. International students find themselves in a foreign country without family or friends, but also without all the interpersonal strategies they used in their home country. They often feel a loss of identity and helplessness. Nothing makes sense anymore and some say they feel like they are drowning. But with some guidance, this time becomes a chance for them to evolve and grow into more authentic human beings. I have seen this happen and it is beautiful to witness.

Was this part of your motivation to research the link between culture shock and personal transformation for your book?

Certainly. My book is partially based on my counseling work with UT PhD students and postdocs

from China, Brazil, Austria, France, Portugal, Italy, Canada and the Netherlands. As we worked through their issues, my clients were slowly and deeply changing their attitudes, how they related to their supervisors and parents, and finding new creative energy. In addition, Dutch clients who had spent time abroad would often relate the importance of that experience - how much it changed them and their perspective on being an immigrant in the Netherlands. And I could relate to that, having spent a lot of time abroad myself.

You analyze culture shock and people's ability to deal with it from a psychosynthesis approach, a branch of psychology you recently graduated in. What exactly does psychosynthesis entail?

Psychosynthesis psychology aims to integrate all aspects of the human personality – thinking, emotions, body sensations, imagination, and intuition. From this synthesis, you are more able to fully express yourself and live life creatively. Psychosynthesis also works with the will, helping you to choose freely and direct your life. Through an integrated personality and a balanced will, you come into better relationship with yourself and others, and your potential to creatively take action in the world.

Some models suggest that cultural shock can be put into four stages: from the honeymoon stage during which everything in the new country appears great, to frustration and, eventually, understanding and acclimatization. What is your opinion on this?

These four stages were first discussed by Kalvero Oberg in 1960. But since then, empirical studies have actually shown that instead of a honeymoon period, most cultural change begins with at least moderate distress. Nearly all my PhD and post-doc clients who were struggling with culture shock-related issues have already been two

years in the Netherlands. I therefore believe that cultural adaptation is a continual and non-linear process.

How easy did you find it yourself to adapt to life in Holland - and the other ten countries you've lived in?

Some countries are definitely easier to adapt to than others. One cultural dimension that affects communication is called Individualism-collectivism: I-C. I-C refers to the extent that the needs of the group dominate over those of the individual. Both the USA – where I am from – and the Netherlands are countries high on the individualism index. Communication is more verbal and direct, and competition rather than cooperation is valued. Naturally, adaptation for me was relatively easy here. Countries like China and Japan are more collectivist, meaning communication is less explicit and harmony is valued over conflict. I spent two years in Japan and that was a high learning curve!

But I also know quite a few UT-ers from a relatively collectivist backgrounds who seemed to feel at home here almost straight away. As a woman from Romania put it to me: “the Netherlands has less family ties – and pressure- and more individuality and that's just totally me.” Meanwhile, an Arabic PhD student confided in me how much he loves Dutch directness and the habit of arriving on time, and how he is struggling to come to terms with the fact that in his country things tend to be “endlessly delayed” by the pressure to always engage in polite conversation and a more relaxed attitude towards time. Do certain personalities simply fit certain countries better; and vice versa?

To some extent. For example, you might come from a culture that is based on collectivism, but yet feel more at home or freer to be yourself in a more individualistic society.

In any case, by living in a foreign country – as opposed to being a tourist – you have the opportunity to discover who you really are underneath your cultural identity and social norms. My work is to help those students, like the one from the Middle East; to integrate his inner cul-

the Netherlands



Lombard's research was based on her observations as a lecturer of academic writing, workshop facilitator and former journalist for the UT-Nieuws' International Page.

tural struggle and grow more fully as a person. In this way, no matter where he is in the world, he can be himself and better relate to others.

What more can Dutch institutions like the UT that are keen to internationalize do to facilitate cultural acclimatization in your opinion?

While the UT provides counseling for masters students, as employees PhDs and post-docs do not have access to these services. Currently, there are 362 international PhD students at the UT, coming from 65 different countries. Remember, when a PhD does not graduate, the university not only loses the creative contribution of that individual, but also financial support from the Ministry of Education. Three of my former PhD clients have told me they had considered quitting their studies

before seeing me. So there is also a financial incentive to help international students cope with life struggles.

Your research drew the attention of Ernst Bohlmeijer, head of the Department of Psychology, Health, and Technology. How do you intend to collaborate on matters relating to culture shock in the near future?

Professor Bohlmeijer has great experience with developing and evaluating health promoting interventions based on positive psychology and narrative psychology. Coming from that line of research, he fortunately found my research project interesting and got enthusiastic about it. Currently, we are planning a project that would assess the needs of UT international students

– provided we can obtain the necessary funds. Based on this survey, I would then provide a training program that would address sociocultural competencies – like coping strategies and multicultural communication. Following on from this, UT students would be encouraged to assess their experience in a positive light and see their life abroad as a chance to grow personally and develop leadership skills. But we don't necessarily intend to leave it at that; this training program could ultimately be applied throughout the Dutch university system. |

To learn more about Catherine or to buy her book (€14,99), visit her website catherineannlombard.com.