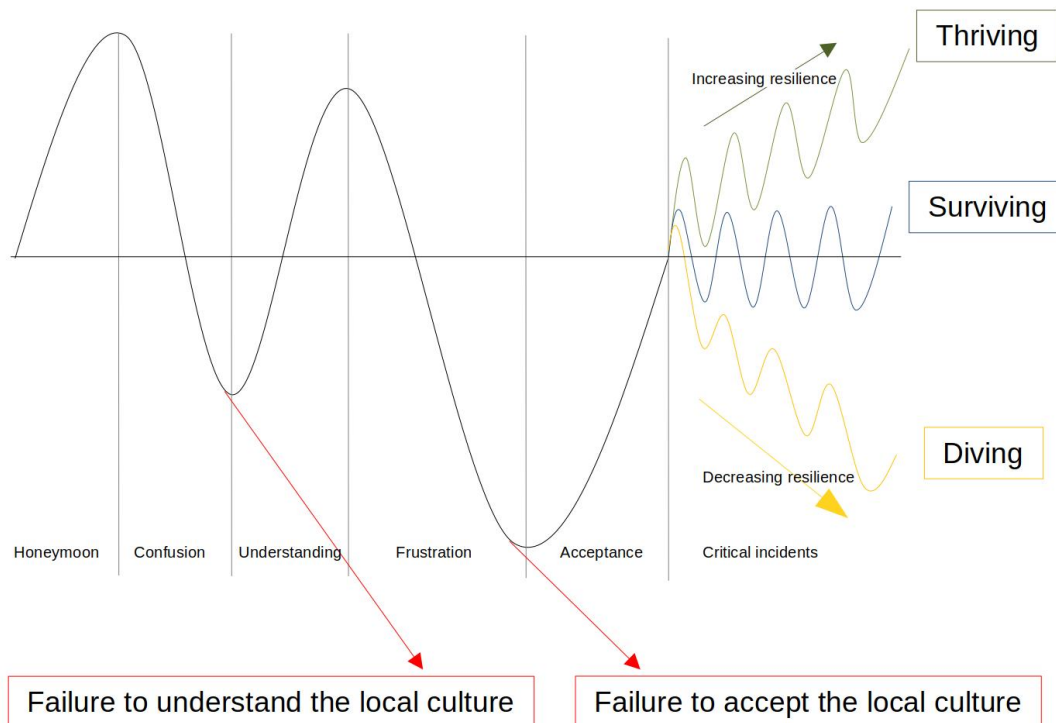


3. Cultural Adaptation

3.1 Culture Shock or Cultural Adaptation?

Culture Shock is a well known phenomenon to those who have traveled to and lived in other cultures, but it is only the beginning of the process of cultural adaptation. However, the term 'Culture Shock' makes cultural adaptation sound like something unpleasant or painful when it can actually be an enjoyable and enriching experience. It is true that there are difficult experiences and negative feelings involved in adapting to another culture, but when seen as part of the big picture, we can view these difficult experiences in a positive way because they are a necessary part of moving forwards in the process of cultural adaptation. We cannot reach a point of greater understanding without first experiencing confusion. We cannot truly accept people with different cultural characteristics unless we first experience the feelings of frustration or even anger as we begin to live and work alongside them.

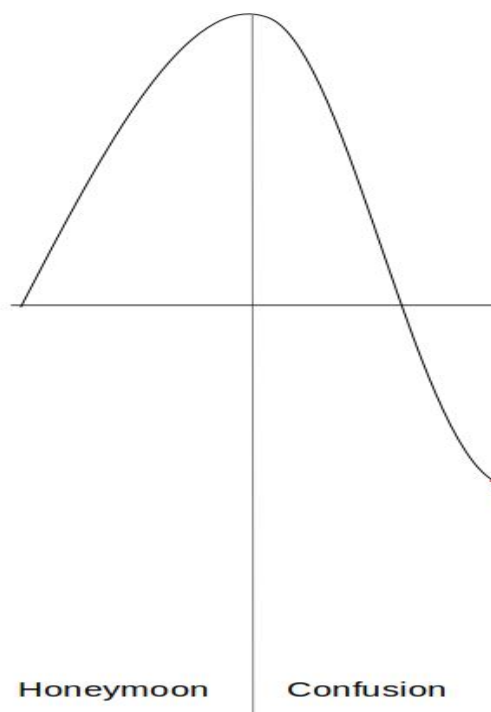


Phase 1 - 'The Honeymoon Period'

Everyone experiences the honeymoon phase of adaptation when they go on a holiday or a short-term trip to another country. Most short trips to other countries are not just about the beautiful scenery, nice weather or fun activities but also about experiencing other cultures.

Experience of local culture on a short trip typically includes things like trying out the local food, going to performances and visiting historical sites. These are all experiences which we find interesting and fun but which do not usually bring any negative feelings, like confusion or frustration. This is because they do not involve much direct interaction with local people. On holiday, our experience of trying to communicate with or cooperate with people is usually limited to things like ordering food, dealing with receptionists or listening to a guide explaining the history of a place.

Occasionally, we may find ourselves irritated if the local concept of customer service differs from our expectations or if things happen later than we were informed they would happen due to a different outlook on time. Often we tell these stories as funny anecdotes alongside accounts of the fun or relaxing elements of our trip. A sense of humour is great tool to help us to transform negative irritations into a positive part of our experience of the culture.



Phase 2 - Confusion

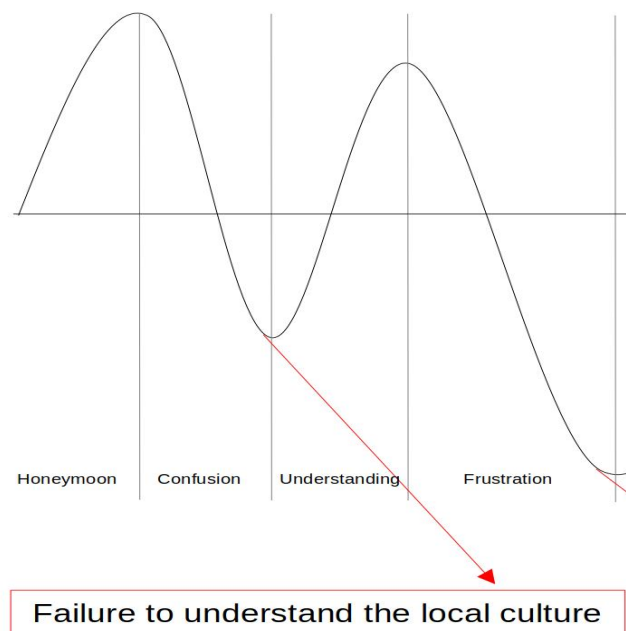
When we stay in another culture for a longer period of time, we begin to deepen our interactions with people and we are forced to learn how day-to-day life differs from our own culture. This experience is always very confusing, especially in cultures which are very different from our own. Perhaps we begin to find that people don't meet our expectations of normal human behaviour. Maybe we experience misunderstandings or accidentally cause offense without knowing why. Often our confusions are about very practical things,

like the process of obtaining a residence visa or a driving licence, and we often find that the people and departments we deal with, work in a way which is very different from what we are used to.

Sometimes we are not sure whether the problem is the culture, our own personality or the personalities of the people we are dealing with. It can be a relief just to know that the confusion you are experiencing is normal and it is not your fault.

Phase 3 - Understanding

It seems obvious that to move forwards from a state of confusion requires understanding, but many people fail to come to a good level of understanding about the culture they have entered. Others settle for a partial-understanding under the false impression that they have learnt everything which they need to know in order to be effective. Failure to understand often leads people to return to their home culture prematurely because of confusion and frustration. However, the frustration at this stage is different from stage Four frustration (see below). While it may feel like a sense of frustration about cultural differences, it is in fact a frustration about the lack of understanding rather than about the characteristics of the culture itself. It is impossible to be frustrated about something which you do not know.



Another thing which can hold us back from understanding other cultures is that we do not understand our own culture. If we grow up without understanding why we have certain values and where our values come from, it can leave us with the notion that these values are just normal for everyone else in the world. For example, British culture is very individualistic, causing British people to be very fond of *'peace and quiet'*, whilst other cultures are very collectivist, valuing a sense of community much more than British people do. They feel more comfortable in a crowded place with lots of noise than in a deserted, quiet place. However, British people who are unaware of this difference, may just think that collectivists are very rude and intrusive when they try to socialise or make friends on a trip to a beautiful, natural area.

Moving into the understanding phase does not mean that we fully understand everything about the culture but it means that we have learnt the skill of asking questions which will help us to understand what is happening and why it is different from our own culture. We need to be careful to ask questions in a way which conveys our interest in other cultures without revealing a sense of frustration. A good principle is to never start a question with 'Why do you/ did you....?' because it can sound judgmental, or with 'Is it OK if I...?' because some local people will understand that foreigners are different and will think that it's fine for them to just be themselves.

Questions to ask when you are confused:

That's interesting! Could you please help me to understand more about

I'd like to know the best way to in your culture.

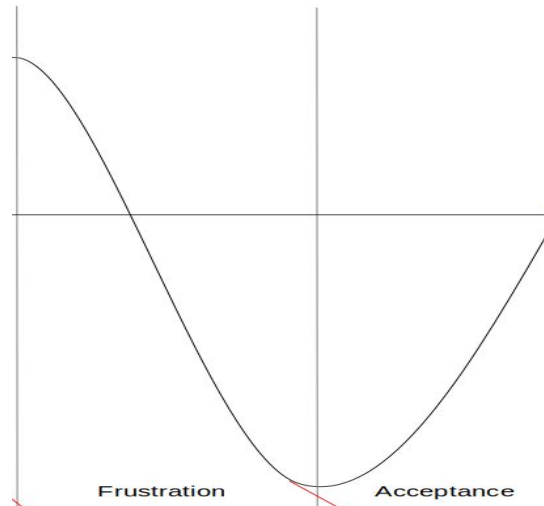
What's the best way to talk about..... in this culture?

What would people here think about....?

Phase 4 - Frustration

Whilst *understanding* is a crucial element of cultural adaptation in the early stages, eventually we find ourselves getting frustrated about people behaving differently, even though we may understand why they are behaving in this way. This is because we are still used to doing things our own way and we still have expectations of others which are based on our own cultural values.

The feelings associated with this stage of adaptation are typically more difficult than the low point of the confusion stage. We can even go beyond frustration to strong feelings of anger towards the local people and the values of their culture. The thing which lies at the heart of these feelings of frustration or anger is the sense that our way is better than their way. This could be described as cultural pride or cultural arrogance and was typical of many of the colonialist nations of the past which considered it their mission to transform the rest of the world into their own cultural image.

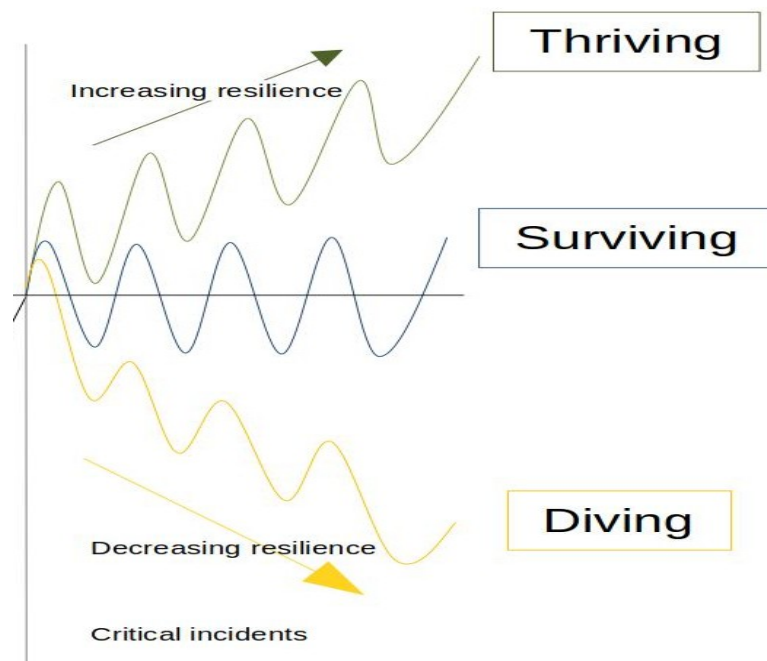


Phase 5 - Acceptance

We will never be able to get over these feelings of frustration unless we learn to accept that our own culture is not better than other cultures, it is just different. Each culture may have its strengths and weaknesses, but all cultures are equal in that they fail to meet God's standards of human behaviour and they all possess values which are contrary to God's values. Sometimes we can even mistake our own values for God's values.

In addition to accepting that our own culture is not intrinsically better than other cultures, we must also realise that we cannot change other cultures, nor should we seek to do so. Even if we teach Christians in other countries that the Bible shows us a different way from their culture, they will be unable to change without a fundamental work of God in their hearts. Culture is so deeply ingrained in our nature we cannot change it ourselves, even if we want to. Only God's transforming power in our hearts can change our values and customs to conform to His.

We will never be able to accept both the people and the cultures of other countries unless we first learn to have an attitude of cultural humility and acceptance as we learn to love people regardless of their culture's strengths and weaknesses. We must also learn that the way the church operates in our country may be as much a reflection of our culture as it is a reflection of the teaching of the Bible.



Phase 6 - Thriving, Surviving or Diving

If we have developed the ability to understand cultural confusions by asking questions and we have learnt to accept and love people in other cultures with an attitude of cultural humility, then we have come a long way towards adapting to the culture. However, there will still be events in our lives which cause irritation due to cultural differences, even if we understand the reasons and accept the differences. These events are called **critical incidents**.

The key to being content and effective in another culture in the long-term is how we respond to critical incidents which will certainly come our way. There are three main choices we can make in deciding how we respond to each critical incident and how we choose to adapt ourselves to the culture in this specific area.

Firstly, we can choose to **embrace** the local culture by changing our behaviour and attitudes to be more in line with the local culture. Secondly, we can choose to **be counter-cultural** in this situation because we can see that the local cultural value being demonstrated is clearly un-biblical. These first two choices are positive outcomes as long as we feel happy about the choice that we made. If we feel a sense of resentment about the choice we made, then it can become a negative outcome. The third possible choice is to respond by attempting to **ignore** the cultural difference and continue life normally, despite the irritation. This is also a negative outcome because similar incidents will inevitably continue to occur, causing a repetition or even an intensifying of the irritation.

Critical incident outcomes

Positive

Embrace culture
Be counter-cultural but Biblical

Negative

Try to ignore the cultural difference
Resentment of choice

Thriving

A positive response to each incident will gradually increase our resilience to future incidents and our level of happiness and effectiveness in the culture will gradually increase. The end result is that we will be in a long term state of thriving in the culture.

Surviving

Some people respond positively to some incidents but negatively to others, which leads to a state of just surviving or tolerating the culture rather than embracing it. Often, these people develop coping strategies to help them to survive some of the more irritating cultural differences, such as choosing to spend more time with people from their own culture. These strategies can work, even in the long-term, but they can also reduce people's effectiveness and prevent them from being truly happy in the culture.

Diving

When an aeroplane is undertaking a slow descent, the passengers may not notice the gradual loss of altitude until their ears start to pop. In a similar way, some people find themselves being slowly dragged down by negative responses to critical incidents. The descent is so gradual that they do not notice until their 'ears pop' and they eventually find themselves in a state of cultural burnout. Each negative response to each critical incident slowly eats away at their resilience and they start to find that incidents which they could have dealt with in the past have a much bigger impact and can cause depression, tiredness and stress to a degree which is out of all proportion to their size. This can also cause other health problems in our bodies and minds which will make our departure inevitable unless we receive professional help from a clinical psychologist familiar with the causes and symptoms of cultural burnout.

Questions:

If you are living in another culture: Which of the six stages do you think you are in now? Do you think that a lack of understanding or acceptance has held you back in the past or is holding you back now? If you have been in another culture for more than five years, do you feel that you are thriving, surviving or slowly diving?

If you are preparing to go: Have you ever lived in another culture before? If yes, what aspects of the culture did you find confusing? What did you find frustrating, even though you understood the reason for this culture trait? Are you aware of some of the differences between your own culture and the culture that you are preparing to enter? What could you do to learn more?