Culture Shock

##### By Melissa Pedersen with Maria Brzeska

###### The change related to moving from one culture into another is profound if it’s perceived to be long-term or permanent.

arminder1 arrived in Canada from India’s Punjab region in the middle of winter. The next day when she awoke and looked

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through the window, there was a thick layer of snow covering everything around.

From her sister’s house located in a resi- dential suburb, Parminder could not see anyone walking on the street. She detected no domestic activities, no children playing, and no noise whatsoever. It was a shocking difference from the community life in Punjab where so many things were done outdoors, where everyone knew each other and their family members (even the distant ones), where people had mu- tual friends, and where the whole community celebrated holidays together. Her new environ- ment felt like a white desert, cold and unfriendly.

She felt totally isolated and lonely. She remem- bers staying at that window and crying, tears falling down her cheeks, longing for the life and the people back in Punjab that she could not imagine missing so much.

Parminder experienced the disorienta- tion of culture shock from her first day in Can- ada. She eventually realized that her Canadian life also had good sides: freedom to make her own decisions, freedom from having every ac- tion scrutinized by society, freedom from confor- mity, the ability to work in her chosen profes- sion, chances to attend courses and develop skills…but it took time for her to recover from the shock.

*(Continued on page 9)*

1. Parminder’s story and those others referenced in this article are real and used with permission.

*(Continued from page 8)*

What is culture shock?

Culture shock2 refers to the physical and emo- tional reaction to sudden immersion into a new environment where one is not certain about ex- pectations and what is or is not appropriate be- haviour in formerly familiar situations. All change engenders shock of some kind. Usually, but not always, if you are the one who decides to make the change, the transition is easier. But the change related to moving from one culture into another, particularly if this change is perceived to be long term or permanent, is profound.

Culture shock can be overwhelming, or not; it can last from weeks to months to years; and knowing how to cope can mean the difference between happiness and depression for the new- comer. It is important for us to be aware of this phenomenon when interacting with students and clients who are adjusting to life in Canada.

The roots of culture shock are several: In addition to the changes in areas of basic needs— housing, food, maybe clothing and language— there are physiological and psychological states newcomers can experience:

* **Loss of support**, of the kind Par- minder had in her village in Pun- jab, and the close ties of family and community many newcomers leave behind, can be acutely felt.
* **Confusion and physical disori- entation** can result when the mi- nutiae of everyday living—smells, sounds, street signs, packaging labels, transportation modes and routes, housing, and so on—are all unfamiliar and discomforting. In Toronto, the lake is to the south; newcomers from places where the main bodies of water were in other directions may have a hard time orienting themselves to the city. A student of mine once told me that the first time he and his family ate at Swiss Chalet, they drank the lemon water bowls

brought to the table at the end of the meal, because in his culture what came in a bowl was soup.

* **Cognitive fatigue** stems from having to learn so many new cues, as well as a new language. One Friday afternoon, one of my LINC students put her hands over her ears and said, “I just can’t listen to any more English today!”
* **Unfamiliar body language** can cause lack of understanding or inappropriate responses in social situations. As an uncertain new driver, Maria made a road error which caused another driver to make a lewd gesture to her. Not knowing the meaning, she pleas- antly waved back to him and re- ported to her friends how friendly Canadian drivers were!
* **Manners may be different** and familiar behaviours don’t work or receive unexpected responses. What is acceptable in one’s coun- try may be considered rude in Canada and vice versa. Some phrases don’t mean what they say. When Canadians say “How are you?” or “How are you do- ing?” they don’t really want to know!
* **Role and personal change** can be huge. Economic needs may reverse financial support roles resulting in diminishing the for- mer breadwinner. Children may learn English faster and become translators and voices for their parents. The inability to work in a field or enter a career that was part of the newcomer’s identity can be a very difficult loss. When I came to Canada myself, I learned that Ontario did not rec- ognize my teaching credentials.

Even with nine years of teaching

*(Continued on page 10)*

1. The term ‘Culture Shock’ was coined by Kalvero Obreg, a British Columbia anthropologist.

*(Continued from page 9)*

experience, I would have to start over, go to teachers’ college and complete a practicum, which was not possible for me with two small children to raise. I felt I had lost a core part of who I was.

For instructors and front-line workers involved with newcomers, it is vital to recognize the symp- toms of culture shock. These can include isola- tion, homesickness, anxiety, mood swings, hostil- ity towards the new culture or other cultures, trouble concentrating and loss of memory, resis- tance to take steps to adjust, and apathy. Behav- iours based on emotion can surface, such as com- fort eating, binge shopping, or spending money when one has very little. There may be marital or family difficulties, or types of domestic abuse.

While interpreting during a local Cana- dian Association for Mental Health (CAMH) work- shop on Mental Health presented to adult LINC students in Burlington, Maria observed partici- pants’ reactions to the facilitator’s information regarding culture shock. They were surprised to identify the symptoms of culture shock with men- tal difficulties they were experiencing in their own lives.

She heard comments like, “I was afraid that I was going crazy”; “I thought something was wrong with my brain because I could not learn anything new, and I always was a very good stu- dent”; and “I did not understand why I was al- ways tired and unhappy.”

They were visibly relieved to learn their seemingly abnormal feelings were the “normal” symptoms of culture shock. Mental health issues clearly fit into the picture of the unbalance new- comers feel during the adjustment process, and we need to help students recognize troubling reactions as a part of this process.

Stages of culture shock

Culture shock runs in a cycle of stages. These stages may all be present for a newcomer or they may not. The process is not linear and might vary with the newcomer’s age, background, reasons

*Figure 1: Stages of Culture Shock (Melissa*

*Pedersen & Maria Brzeska)*



**Stage 1**

**Euphoria**, or the ‘Honeymoon Stage:’ The new- comer is excited to be in the new country, opti- mistic and enthusiastic about the change. At this point, goals may not be realistic, or expectations may be too high. Yet some, like Parminder, may not experience this happy state and may move immediately to the next stage.

**Stage 2**

**Frustration and Disappointment**: The new- comer crashes. Hopes have been dashed, goals not attained, the new culture overwhelms and may now be seen negatively. The newcomer longs for old support systems, and disillusion- ment and even depression set in. During this phase, the newcomer often recalls a more per- fect view of his or her native country and its cul- ture than is real, remembers especially happy moments and situations, and as a result, puts many of the cultural components of the country of origin on a pedestal: culinary traditions, family life, education and lifestyle.

Some newcomers never progress beyond this stage. Some go home, especially if things are seen to be improving there. Ms. Escffery, a char- acter in Peta-Gaye Nash’s *I too Hear the Drums: Stories* explains her return to Jamaica from Can- ada: “You’re a nobody when you move to for-

3

for coming, and whether or not Canada is the first

eign. Everybody is just a number.”

Some retreat

country of migration. Graphically, this experi- ence resembles a reverse bell curve.

to ethnic enclaves where immigrants remain iso-

*(Continued on page 11)*

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lated from mainstream culture and live within the boundaries of their own.

**Stage 3**

**Adjustment and Recovery:** The newcomer is beginning to explore options and navigate in the new culture. Aspects of the new environment are becoming more familiar, basic

needs have been met, some immediate goals have been achieved and this state of

growth and development, how-

have to cope with post-traumatic stress disorders and depressions generated by their experiences in their former countries.

And there is one more complication for the newcomer to Canada. With our official policy of multiculturalism, Canada is increasingly be- coming a web of interconnected cultures with

whatever is ‘Canadian’ at the centre. Students have asked me so many times what “typical Ca- nadian food” or “typical Cana- dian customs” were. Like Rabin-

ever difficult it may be, results in positive insights and accep- tance of the new culture. Some sociologists have referred to this as the ‘Educational Stage.’

**Stage 4**

**Acceptance and Adaptation:** The newcomer is relatively inte- grated into the larger society, having achieved some suc- cesses and a level of comfort with the new environment. In Canada’s multi-culture, this might mean keeping some cul- tural identity, customs and ob- servances from the home coun- try and still feeling part of Cana- dian society.

This is a theoretical model, but it can be practically applied to understand the needs

**“Canada is**

**increasingly becoming a web of interconnected cultures with whatever is ‘Canadian’ at the centre.”**

dranath Maharaj’s character in *The Amazing Absorbing Boy4* who arrives in downtown Toronto

from Trinidad eager to find ‘a typical Canadian,’ that which is ‘Canadian’ may be elusive. Sam- uel meets many people with many stories, but never finds what he is looking for. While the core of Canadian culture is es- sentially British (and French in Quebec and part of New Bruns- wick), the social changes brought about by the influx of immigrants from many cultures is simultaneously changing what that core was. This means new- comers have to integrate into a diverse culture, rather than a dominant mono-culture. While this can have advantages, it may ultimately be a more difficult process.

of our students and clients. The process, as men- tioned, is not linear, and is not the same for every newcomer. Some may experience adaptation in some aspects of life, such as community interac- tion and speaking English, but still struggle in Stage 2 in terms of finding employment. Some may bounce between stages for some time be- fore ‘settling in.’ Refugee newcomers may have had experiences that put yet another layer on the complexities of integrating, because they might

Dealing with culture shock

So how can we, as instructors and front-line workers, help newcomers to move through this process? First, look for signs of culture shock in your clients. Really listen to them. Encourage students to speak about and share their experi-

*(Continued on page 12)*

1. *I Too Hear the Drums*, Stories, Peta-Gaye Nash, In Our Words, Inc, 2010.
2. *The Amazing Absorbing Boy*, Rabindranath Maharaj, Knopf Canada, 2010.

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ences with others. Most are eager to share, and storytelling can be a fun, social experience. When we first introduced the topic of sharing culture shock experiences at an evening conver- sation circle for newcomers, those attending could not stop talking about them, and we had to continue the discussions at a future meeting. People feel supported when they think they are not alone.

Create an environment in your class- room where newcomers can develop the quali- ties they need in order to overcome culture shock:

* + Flexibility.
	+ Open-mindedness.
	+ Communicativeness.
	+ Curiosity.
	+ Positive and realistic expectations.
	+ Ability to move forward from per- ceived failure.
	+ Tolerance for differences and am- biguities.
	+ Positive regard for others.
	+ A strong sense of Self.
	+ Above all, a positive attitude to- wards the changes happening in their lives.

All cultural adjustment involves frustra- tion, confusion, tension and embarrassment. The attitude with which newcomers react to their new culture informs their outcomes. Newcomers who approach the adjustment with openness, accep- tance and trust develop coping techniques that allow them to observe, listen and enquire, result- ing in understanding and developing rapport with the new culture. Reacting with negativity, criticism, suspicion and rationalization results in the newcomer becoming marginalized and iso- lated.

met. Recommend volunteering in the community as a great way to meet new people, practice English and get to know more about their envi- ronment. If you have a HOST or similar program, family matching can be a great help to new arri- vals. Encourage students to talk with their settle- ment workers or attend counselling if they are deeply entrenched in Stage 2.

You may very well ask, “Can we not educate immigrants; make them ‘culture shock– proof’ before they come to Canada?” No matter how much we may research another culture and think we know about it, we all come not knowing what we don’t know. And living an experience is different from imagining it. No matter how much newcomers may try to defend against and pre- pare for culture shock before entering Canada, they are ultimately vulnerable to it. A need exists for professional counselling and mental health help for so many immigrants, especially refu- gees. Presently there is only limited access to culturally appropriate mental health services for newcomers, and newcomers often delay looking for help or simply do not ask.

Perhaps one day every LINC and ESL centre will have a psychologist on the Settlement team, but until that time, the best those of us who work with newcomers can do is to educate our- selves, and help students through the adjustment process with dedication and understanding. •

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*They presented this workshop at the TESL Ontario conference, October 2010.*

Make sure students are oriented to their community and that their basic needs are being