

Classic Readings in

Cultural Anthropology

Fourth Edition



Gary Ferraro



Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology



Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology

FOURTH EDITION

GARY FERRARO

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte



Australia • Brazil • Mexico • Singapore • United Kingdom • United States

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***Classic Readings in Cultural
Anthropology, Fourth Edition***

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Preface

Cultural anthropologists have estimated that there are more than five thousand different cultures in the world today that speak mutually unintelligible languages. With such enormous linguistic and cultural variability in the world, it is virtually impossible to become conversant with *all* of the details of *all* of these different cultures. Thus, by necessity, the study of cultural anthropology at the introductory level needs to take a more conceptual approach. Beginning students, in other words, are exposed typically to certain core ideas that provide a conceptual framework for studying comparative cultures. Introductory textbooks, for example, are organized around such chapters as marriage and family, which, in turn, cover such key concepts as polygyny, levirate, arranged marriages, sororate, cross-cousin marriage, and bridewealth. These central concepts are defined and illustrated with ethnographic data from around the world.

Admittedly, introductory textbooks in cultural anthropology take a broad-brush approach to a vast subject matter. The emphasis, by necessity, is to expose beginning students to the enormity of cultural variability, while also allowing them to see universal similarities among the cultures of the world. This general approach to studying other cultures, however, can be enhanced by supplemental readings, which permit the student to explore some areas of the subject matter in greater depth. It is with this idea of “post holding” in mind that *Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology* was conceived.

This reader was carefully designed to include those articles and segments from books that best represent the discipline over the course of the past century. These readings were not selected because they represent the most recent research and cutting-edge thinking of twenty-first-century scholars. Rather, they represent writings that have been assigned to introductory students for over forty years. While being eminently relevant for cultural anthropology today, these selections have endured the decades to become classics in the field. As one anthropologist has put it, these readings are the “gold standard” for modern cultural anthropology.

The readings found in *Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology* were selected after consulting with a number of cultural anthropologists, including some leading authors of introductory textbooks. Included in this fourth edition are pieces dating back to as early as 1971 (those of Edward and Mildred Hall and George Gmelch) and as recently as 2013 (Ferraro's and Briody's). It should be pointed out that selections were not excluded for containing terminology that is considered politically incorrect today. In some of the earlier writings, for example, we will see such terms as *man* used to refer generically to humans or the use of the term *Eskimo* instead of the more current term *Inuit*. Nevertheless, the use of these outdated terms (which were not politically incorrect at the time they were written) does not invalidate the relevance of these writings for contemporary cultural anthropology.

Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology is organized according to the major categories found in most introductory courses of cultural anthropology. These include perspectives on culture, language and communication, economics and ecology, marriage and family, gender, politics and social control, supernatural beliefs, and issues of culture change. Because these eight subheadings are also found in many traditional textbooks in cultural anthropology, adopting professors of this fourth edition of *Classic Readings* should find it relatively easy in coordinating reading assignments.

There are six new selections in this fourth edition of *Classic Readings*. First, investigative journalist Mark Jacobson's piece entitled *Dharavi: Mumbai's Shadow City*, originally published in the *National Geographic Magazine*, serves as a reminder to both anthropology students and their professors that one need not be a cultural anthropologist by training to adequately describe the parameters of a radically different culture; tell the story of culturally different people through their eyes rather than your own; and be able to clearly state the policy implications for government or NGO programs of planned change. Second, drawing upon the perspective of behavioral ecology, Richard Sosis presents a strong argument that religion is much more than an irrational set of values, ideas, and rituals, but rather functions as a highly adaptive institution for peoples from all cultures. Third, included in the section on politics and social control, applied anthropologist Anne Sutherland, serving in the role of expert witness to a court in St. Paul, Minnesota, helps defend a Gypsy man accused of purchasing an automobile by using someone else's Social Security number. This is a classic example of how minority cultural values and practices can conflict with the civil statutes of the larger society. In the section on gender, Lila Abu-Lughod, an expert on gender roles among Muslim women in Egypt, wrote the new selection shortly after 9/11, when the United States was building the case for war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This piece questions the logic of the argument of going to war against the Taliban for the purpose of liberating Afghan women from the tyranny of the "Taliban terrorists" because the argument relies on some spurious ethnographic information and diverts attention away from examining the history of repressive regimes in Muslim countries and the role the United States played in this history. Nancy Scheper-Hughes's classic piece, entitled "Death Without Weeping," which has appeared in the first three editions of *Classic Readings in*

Cultural Anthropology, is being replaced in this edition by a more recent (2013) updated version of the original theme of mother–child bonds in a Brazilian shantytown. Beginning with her original observations from the mid-1960s, Dr. Scheper-Hughes confirms her original thesis of the relationship between extreme poverty and the weakening of the mother–child bond by including data collected between 2001 and 2009.

And finally, two business anthropologists, Gary Ferraro and Elizabeth Briody, offer an analysis of *culture shock* (the psychological disorientation experienced when living in a radically different culture) by looking at its symptoms and stages, and making suggestions for how to minimize its (oftentimes) debilitating effects. Interestingly, this topic of culture shock, although stunningly relevant to ethnographic fieldwork and learning about different cultures experientially, has not received much systematic coverage in the anthropological literature.

The reader contains a number of pedagogical features designed to help the beginning student learn the content of cultural anthropology more efficiently. First, each reading is preceded by a brief introduction, which helps the reader better understand both the article’s relevance and context. Second, a series of Discussion Questions at the end of each piece serves not only as a check on understanding but also as a means to stimulate lively class discussions and encourage readers to make connections to their everyday lives.

The purpose of this book is to provide beginning students of cultural anthropology with a set of readings that have stood the test of time. To ensure that this selection of readings meets your needs as both students and instructors, I encourage you to send me your thoughts on how we can improve upon this volume. Please send your comments to me at garyferraro425@gmail.com.

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Introduction

In a recent article in *Anthropology Newsletter*, anthropologists Elizabeth Bird and Carolena Von Trapp report on a nonscientific survey they conducted among one hundred undergraduates who had never taken a course in anthropology. Many of the common stereotypes about anthropology were confirmed. The majority of respondents associated the discipline with stones and bones exclusively; very few could cite the name of a real anthropologist other than the fictional Indiana Jones; and the image of the anthropologist that emerged was a person who was drab, eccentric, elderly, bookish, unbusinesslike, disheveled, wore shabby clothes, and had very little to do with anything outside of academia. All of these impressions are misleading stereotypes that do nothing but obscure the nature of the discipline and its relevance beyond academia.

Of all of the social sciences, anthropology is the most broadly defined. Some anthropologists do, in fact, deal primarily with stones and bones. One branch of anthropology (*archaeology*) searches for artifacts and other cultural remains of people who lived in the distant past. The subfield of *physical anthropology* unearths fossil remains for the purpose of reconstructing the human evolutionary record. Yet, there are other anthropologists (*cultural anthropologists* and *linguists*) whose focus is on live, warm bodies (i.e., living cultures). Even though these different branches of anthropology have different research agendas, they are all directed at a single purpose: the scientific study of humans, both biologically and culturally, wherever and whenever they may be found. This volume deals only with cultural anthropology, defined most simply as the comparative study of contemporary peoples throughout the world.

Even cultural anthropology, when contrasted with other social sciences, tends to be a wide-ranging discipline. Political scientists focus on power relationships among a group of people. Economists confine their studies to how people produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Sociologists concentrate on social interaction as their major theoretical construct. Cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, do not limit themselves to a single domain of activity.

Rather, by focusing on the concept of culture, cultural anthropologists look at *all* aspects of behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and material possessions. This comprehensive perspective on the study of human behavior makes cultural anthropology particularly effective at helping us better understand people different from ourselves.

What do we mean by the term *culture*? Although we all think we know what culture is, anthropologists have a considerably different definition from the one popularly held. In everyday usage, the term *culture* refers to the finer things in life, such as symphonies, great works of art, and fine wines. In other words, the so-called cultured person prefers Bach to Britney Spears, spends time at art openings rather than at the NASCAR track, and drinks expensive French champagne rather than Bud Light. Cultural anthropologists, however, define the term *culture* much more broadly to include the total lifeways of a group of people. This anthropological definition of culture involves much more than playing cello in a string quartet or eating pheasant under glass. For the anthropologist, a culture encompasses all aspects of a group's behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and material possessions—both the artistic and the mundane. Shaking hands, brushing one's teeth, visiting Aunt Maude, or eating a hot dog are all part of the widely defined anthropological definition of the term *culture*.

But what is it that enables the discipline of cultural anthropology to so effectively reveal human nature? To be certain, cultural anthropologists over the past century have adhered to certain guiding principles that have distinguished them from other social scientists. First, anthropologists take a highly comparative approach by examining cultural similarities and differences throughout the world. Such an approach serves as a valuable corrective against the pitfall of explaining all human behavior in terms of one's own culture. A case in point is the revision of a prominent psychological theory in the early twentieth century in light of comparative, cross-cultural data from Melanesia. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founders of modern anthropology, spent four years of uninterrupted fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of the Pacific between 1914 and 1918. At the time, a widely held theory of psychotherapy was the Oedipus complex, in which Sigmund Freud explained the sociopsychological tension between fathers and sons as the result of sexual jealousy over the mother. Freud reasoned that because all males have an innate desire to have sexual relations with their mother, they are jealous of their fathers, who, in fact, do have such sexual relations.

However, Malinowski's research among the matrilineal Trobrianders revealed no social or psychological tension between a man and his biological father, as was common in Western Europe where Freud made his observations. The Trobriand Islanders made the distinction between a man's *biological* father (who actually impregnated the mother) and his *social* father (who is actually the man's maternal uncle). Malinowski found that in Trobriand society there was considerable tension with the social father (the man actually responsible for his upbringing) and little or no tension with the biological father, who was more like an older brother. Clearly, everyone understood that it was the biological father who slept with the mother to produce the child. Malinowski concluded

that the tension between fathers and sons observed by Freud in Europe was, in fact, the result of authority rather than sexual jealousy, and as a result, the so-called Oedipus complex was a culture-bound explanation of human behavior. Here, then, is an example of how the broad, comparative approach of cultural anthropology served as a check against an oversimplified explanation of human behavior based solely on evidence from one's own culture.

A second principle that has guided cultural anthropology over the past hundred years has been firsthand observation and inquiry. Many social scientists rely primarily on secondary data such as census data or survey information collected from respondents with whom the scientists never have any face-to-face contact. Cultural anthropologists, by way of contrast, rely on participant observation to a greater extent than any other single data-gathering technique. As its name implies, participant observation involves living in the culture under study while also making systematic observations about it. By engaging in participant observation, cultural anthropologists share in the everyday activities of the local people while making detailed observations of people working, playing, eating, talking, trading, educating, or performing any other cultural activity. The methodological advantages of hands-on research should be obvious. Because most people appreciate any attempt from outsiders to at least try to live according to their culture, participant observation will, in most cases, improve both rapport and the quality of the data received. Moreover, firsthand research allows the anthropologist to distinguish between what people actually do and what they say they do. Participant-observers, in other words, have the advantage of observing actual behavior rather than relying on hearsay.

Perhaps the single most important feature that cultural anthropologists bring to the study of other cultures is the insistence upon viewing a foreign cultural object within its proper *cultural context*. Whenever people encounter a foreign cultural item (such as an idea, a material object, or a behavior pattern), the usual tendency is to make sense of it in terms of their own cultural assumptions. They generally ask themselves the question: How does this foreign idea or thing fit into my culture? Of course, because it is not part of their culture, there is absolutely no reason why it should fit in. There is, in other words, nothing in their own culture that would tend to support that particular cultural item. If you really want to understand why this particular idea or thing is part of that foreign culture, it must be examined in terms of that culture rather than your own.

Perhaps an example would help. Most middle-class North Americans, men and women alike, see no sense in the practice of polygyny (a man having more than one wife at a time). They see it as nonsensical or, worse yet, downright immoral and illegal. And viewed from the perspective of their own cultural assumptions, they would be right. There is very little in our culture that would support or reinforce the practice of polygyny. In fact, there are many parts of our culture that would be in direct conflict with polygyny, such as our legal system and the norms of Christian churches. Even our economic system is at odds with polygyny, because in a cash economy such as our own, it makes no economic sense whatsoever to have large numbers of wives and large numbers of children.

However, if we view polygyny from its original cultural context—let us say from the cultural perspective of an East African mixed farming community—it makes a good deal of sense. In fact, given all of the other parts of *that* culture, polygyny is the most logical form of marriage imaginable. First, there is nothing illegal about having more than one wife at a time in East Africa. Second, their traditional agricultural system encourages men to take more than one wife to maximize the size of the family. Unlike in the United States where large families are economically irrational, in East Africa the more family members there are to cultivate crops, the better off the entire group will be. Third, the system of social prestige in East Africa is based on the number of wives and overall family size, not material wealth as is the case in our own society. Even women in traditional African societies, wanting to be part of a high-status household, supported their husbands' efforts to take additional wives. And finally, the practice of polygyny is supported in many East African societies by the traditional religious practice of ancestor worship. Because men are often elevated to the status of ancestor-god upon death, it is only logical that men would want to have large families so they will have large numbers of people worshipping them after they die. A man with one wife and one child would have only a “congregation” of two people!

Thus, cultural anthropology teaches us that if we view a foreign cultural item through our own cultural lens, it is not likely to make much sense. When polygyny is wrenched from its original cultural context in East Africa, there is no way that it can seem rational. The best way to truly understand an item from another culture is to view it from within its proper cultural content. No one is asking you to practice a foreign cultural norm (such as polygyny). In fact, you are not even required to like it. But if you want to understand the inherent logic of why people in another culture think and behave the way they do (which is the primary objective of the discipline of cultural anthropology), then it is imperative that you follow the lead of cultural anthropology, which from its beginnings has insisted on analyzing the parts of different cultures within their original contexts.

Coping with Culture Shock

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Cultural Keys, LLC

From its earliest beginnings in the nineteenth century, the subdiscipline of cultural anthropology has relied primarily on direct, experiential fieldwork (lasting a year or two at a time) for conducting research. For much of this history, the profession acknowledged that all fieldworkers would experience a certain amount of psychological discomfort when living and working in a culture radically different from their own. It was simply considered part of the job description. If the problems of adjusting to a new culture became too difficult, the anthropologist would no doubt be advised to stay at home and become a certified public accountant. It wasn't until 1960 that the term culture shock even made its way into the anthropological literature. Up until the present time, anthropologists were not spending a whole lot of time studying the very real phenomenon of culture shock. However, increasingly, applied anthropologists (such as medical, business, or educational anthropologists) who work with non-anthropologists in culturally diverse settings have been much more attentive to analyzing the nature of culture shock and suggesting ways of minimizing its more deleterious effects.

*This selected reading, written by two business anthropologists, is a short chapter from a book titled *The Cultural Dimension of Global Business* (7th edition). Although written for international businesspeople, the concepts and strategies found in this chapter are no less relevant for educators, medical practitioners, engineers, international aid workers, architects, diplomats, agronomists, or members of any professional groups working in unfamiliar cultural environments. This selected reading is not a step-by-step “cookbook” on avoiding culture shock in any and every culture of the world, but rather is a conceptual piece that looks at the nature of culture shock, its usual stages, and its complex set of symptoms, and then provides a number of generalized suggestions for reducing the harmful effects of culture shock in order to adjust effectively to a new cultural environment. It also describes a frequently unanticipated phenomenon called reentry shock, a type of reverse culture shock, whereby the person who has made a successful adjustment to a new work environment has difficulty adjusting to his or her original culture when returning home. The bottom line of this selection*

SOURCE: FERRARO, GARY; BRIODY, ELIZABETH, CULTURAL DIMENSION OF GLOBAL BUSINESS, THE, 7th Edition, © 2013. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

is that cultural shock is real, can be devastating to one's career if ignored, will affect everyone working in a different culture to some degree, and can be managed (and indeed overcome) with the proper level of motivation and information.

Tom Walters, a 46-year-old fast-track executive from a high-tech company based in Denver, was selected to oversee the construction of a large manufacturing plant in rural China. After discussing the three-year relocation with his wife Laura and two teenage daughters, Tom decided to take the job because it would be a good career move. After several months of attending to the many details involved in any international move, the Walters family arrived at their new home; it was located about 120 miles from Shanghai, China.

Although the company provided the family with a luxurious home, Tom started his job within three days after arrival, leaving most of the details of “settling in” to Laura. With Tom spending long hours at the job site each day, Laura needed to enroll the girls in school, get a driver’s license, deal with some immigration issues, find the best places to buy groceries, and generally learn how to navigate in a radically new and different culture. At first Laura was excited about being in such a dynamic, and culturally different, part of the world. It was very much like being on vacation in an interesting and exotic country. But it didn’t take long before the “magic” of being in a foreign country began to wear thin. Working with various civil servants proved to be agonizingly slow. Navigating grocery stores, which seemed like a maze to Laura, became increasingly frustrating. Local people seemed unfriendly and unwilling to answer her questions, largely due to the fact that Laura spoke no Chinese other than such basics as “hello” and “thank you.” She began to dread having to leave her house because she was having so much difficulty dealing with “those people.” In an attempt to preserve her sanity, she joined an organization for expatriate unemployed spouses, where she spent an increasing amount of her time with similarly unhappy foreign dependents. Moreover, their two teenage daughters were not adjusting well to their new school and were suffering from “separation anxiety” from their friends back home in Denver.

Within several months the unhappiness of his wife and daughters began to affect Tom’s job performance. He began to feel guilty that his desire for his own career advancement was a major cause of his family’s inability to adjust to the new and different cultural environment. Owing to Tom’s distractions from his job, the building project he was overseeing fell so far behind schedule that the Chinese partnering company eventually backed out of the project. The upshot was that the building project was cancelled, Tom and his family were sent back to the States, and Tom’s company lost tens of millions of dollars in the aborted joint venture.

This unfortunate scenario of Tom Walters and his family is neither hypothetical nor particularly rare. For decades, global businesspeople worldwide have had to overcome numerous challenges of cultural adjustment when living and working abroad on long-term assignments. In Tom’s case, the consequences for his company and his own career were indeed serious, and the financial losses were disastrous. Most often, however, foreign assignees do not become “premature returnees,” but their job performance is negatively impacted nevertheless. What all of these cases have in common, however, is that the employees and/or their families contract a malady known as “culture shock”—psychological stress resulting from trying to adjust to major differences in lifestyles, living conditions, and business practices in another cultural setting.

THE NATURE OF CULTURE SHOCK

Definition

Culture shock, a term first popularized by anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, refers to the psychological disorientation experienced by people who suddenly

find themselves living and working in radically different cultural environments. Oberg describes culture shock as the anxiety that results when all familiar cultural props have been knocked out from under a person who is entering a new culture:

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. Now these cues which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we do not carry on the level of conscious awareness (1960: 177).

Culture shock ranges from mild irritation to a deep-seated psychological panic or crisis. Culture shock occurs when people such as U.S. businesspersons and their family members, all of a sudden, try to play a game abroad in which they have little or no understanding of the basic rules. Here are some examples of statements (from interview data collected by Elizabeth Briody and Judith Beeber Chrisman) made by American expatriates about the early period of their overseas assignment:

- **Expatriate Spouse:** “I was pregnant. We were not looking forward to moving and had no idea we would be going (on an overseas assignment). It was a surprise ... I was sick for two months from the pregnancy. We are at such a high altitude here (in Mexico). We have to boil our water. We eat at home always.”

(She began to cry and it took her several minutes to regain composure.)

- **Expatriate Spouse:** “We were afraid for him (my husband). He would cry at dinner. We didn’t want to tell him about our problems. He was feeling guilty that he got us into this.”
- **Expatriate Child:** “Hearing the kids talking to the teachers in Spanish was hard. I thought that they were supposed to be talking in English since it was the American School.”

Expatriates must struggle to uncover what is meaningful in this new cultural environment, while acknowledging that many of their own familiar cultural cues may be irrelevant. They are forced to try out new and unfamiliar modes of behavior, all the while never really knowing when they might be unwittingly committing a gross social indiscretion. Culture shock usually carries with it feelings of helplessness and irritability, while producing fears of being cheated, injured, contaminated, or discounted. Even though everyone, to some extent, suffers the anxiety of culture shock when first arriving in an unfamiliar cultural setting, the very success or failure of an overseas living assignment depends largely on how well one can make the psychological adjustment and get beyond the frequently debilitating effects.

Both social scientists and laypeople use the term *culture shock* to define in very broad terms the unpleasant consequences of experiencing a foreign culture. Since the 1960s a number of writers in the field have attempted to elaborate on Oberg’s (1960) original formulation by using such terms as *role shock* (Byrnes 1966), *culture fatigue* (Guthrie 1975), and *pervasive ambiguity* (Ball-Rokeach 1973). Yet despite these variations on Oberg’s original theme, there is general agreement that culture shock involves the following dimensions:

- A sense of confusion over expected role behavior
- A sense of surprise, even disgust, after encountering some of the features of the new culture

- A sense of loss of the old familiar surroundings (friends, possessions, and routines)
- A sense of loss of self-esteem because the inability to function in the new culture results in an imperfect meeting of professional objectives
- A feeling of impotence at having little or no control over the environment
- A strong sense of doubt when old values (which had always been held as absolute) are brought into question.

Despite the use of the word *shock*, which implies a sudden jolt, culture shock does not occur quickly, nor is it the result of a single event. Rather, it results from a series of cumulative experiences. When you first arrive in a new culture, usually flying into a major city, the cultural contrasts do not seem too obvious. There are usually traffic lights, taxis, tall buildings with elevators, banks, and modern hotels with English-speaking desk clerks. But before long, the very real cultural differences become painfully apparent. People push in front of you in line rather than lining up in an orderly fashion; when people say yes, they don't always mean yes; you try to be thoughtful by asking about the health of your business partner's wife, and he acts offended; you invite local acquaintances to your home for dinner, but they don't reciprocate; you cannot buy things that you are accustomed to having every day at home; people promise to have something done by tomorrow, but it doesn't get done; you tell a humorous story to your colleague at the office and he responds with a blank look on his face; you try to be friendly, but people don't respond. As those first days and weeks pass, the differences become more apparent, and the anxiety and sense of frustration build slowly. Trying to cope with all the newness is beginning to sap you of your energy. Eventually, the cultural differences become the focus of attention. You no longer perceive the foreign ways of thinking and acting as quaint and fascinating alternative ways of living but rather as pathological and clearly inferior to your own. When this occurs, culture shock has set in.

Impact While Abroad

Robert Kohls (1984: 65) and Elisabeth Marx (1999: 32) provide a fairly comprehensive list of the major symptoms that have been observed in relatively severe cases of culture shock:

- Homesickness
- Boredom
- Withdrawal (e.g., spending excessive amounts of time reading; seeing only other Americans; avoiding contact with host nationals) Need for excessive amounts of sleep
- Compulsive eating
- Compulsive drinking
- Irritability
- Exaggerated cleanliness
- Marital stress
- Family tension and conflict
- Chauvinistic excesses
- Stereotyping of host nationals
- Hostility toward host nationals
- Loss of ability to work effectively
- Unexplainable fits of weeping
- Physical ailments (psychosomatic illnesses)
- Feelings of isolation
- Weight loss
- Feelings of helplessness
- Tenseness, moodiness, and irritability
- Loss of confidence
- Fear of the worst happening.

Because culture shock is characterized by a large and diverse set of symptoms, the malady is frequently difficult to predict and control. It is important to point out, however, that not everyone will experience all the symptoms, but almost all people will experience some. Moreover, some symptoms, or combination of symptoms, will vary in severity from one case to another. Yet, whenever

any of the symptoms manifest themselves while one is living and working abroad, one can be sure that culture shock has set in.

Individual international businesspeople vary greatly in the extent to which they suffer from culture shock. A few people are so ill suited to working in culturally different environments that they repatriate shortly after arriving in the host country. Others manage to get by with a minimum of psychological discomfort. But for most Westerners, operating abroad involves a fairly severe bout with culture shock. According to Oberg (1960), culture shock usually occurs in the following four stages:

1. *The honeymoon stage:* Most people begin their foreign assignment with a positive attitude, so this initial stage is usually characterized by euphoria. At this point, all that is new is exotic and exciting. Attitudes about the host country, and one's capacity to operate in it successfully, are unrealistically positive. During this initial stage, which may last from several days to several weeks, the recent arrival is probably staying temporarily at a Western-style hotel or staff guesthouse where food, conditions of cleanliness, and language are not appreciably different from those at home. The sojourner's time is devoted to getting established—finding a house, a car, and perhaps schools for the children. It is possible that the family's standard of living in this foreign land will be more opulent than they were accustomed to while living in the United States. By and large, it is the similarities between this new country and the United States that stand out—which leads one to the erroneous conclusion that people are really all alike under the skin.
2. *Irritation and hostility:* But as with marriages, honeymoons do not last forever. Within several weeks or perhaps months, problems arise at work, at home, and at the marketplace. Things taken for granted at home simply don't occur. A number of small problems become insurmountable obstacles. Now, all of a sudden, it is the cultural differences, not the similarities, that loom so large. For the first time it becomes clear that, unlike a two-week vacation, one will be in this situation for the next 12–18 months. The second stage of culture shock has set in; this second stage represents the crisis stage of the “disease.” Small problems are blown out of proportion. It is during this stage that one or more of the symptoms mentioned are manifested to some degree. A commonly used mode for dealing with this crisis stage is to band together with other expatriates to disparage the local people: “How can they be so lazy?” “So dirty?” “So stupid?” “So slow?” Now is when ethnic jokes proliferate. The speed with which one passes through this crisis stage of culture shock will vary directly with the ultimate success of the international assignment. Unfortunately, some never get past stage 2, and they become premature return statistics or somehow manage to stick it out but at a high cost to themselves, their families, and their companies. Inadequate job performance leads to a “loss of business, low morale among host country national employees, and poor corporate image generally” (Briody and Chrisman 1991: 277).
3. *Gradual adjustment:* Stage 3 marks the passing of the crisis and a gradual recovery. This stage may begin so gradually that the “patient” is unaware that it is even happening. An understanding slowly emerges of how to operate within the new culture. Some cultural cues now begin to make sense; patterns of behavior begin to emerge, which enable a certain level of predictability; some of the language is becoming comprehensible; and some of the problems of everyday living—which seemed so overwhelming in stage 2—are beginning to be resolved. In short, the culture seems more natural and more manageable. A capacity to laugh at one's situation is a sure sign that adjustment—and ultimate recovery—are well under way.
4. *Biculturalism:* The fourth and final stage, representing full or near full recovery, involves the ability to function effectively in two different

cultures. The local customs that were so unsettling months earlier are now both understood and appreciated. Without having to “go native,” the international businessperson now accepts many of the new cultural ways for what they are. This is not to imply that all strains in intercultural relationships have disappeared, but the high-level anxiety caused by living and working in a different cultural environment is reduced. Moreover, in a number of situations, those making a full recovery from culture shock find that there are many local customs to which they have become accustomed and which will be missed upon returning home. Again, many people never reach stage 4. It is possible to “get by” with a modicum of success by never going beyond stage 3. But for those who do become bicultural, the international assignment can be a truly positive, growth-producing experience.

A lot has happened in the realm of global business since Oberg’s seminal work. More companies are doing business overseas; international assignments continue to rise, as Aahad Osman-Gani and Thomas Rockstuhl point out in their recent review of the expatriate literature (2008). Many firms send employees and their families abroad, particularly as new partnerships are being established (e.g., joint ventures) or as infrastructure is being built (e.g., new plants). Many are on assignment for about three years; they may take subsequent assignments. Others may take short-term assignments of a year or less in duration. Those who are successful will have developed an ability to negotiate and operate not only biculturally, as suggested by Oberg, but also triculturally—within the local host country national culture, within the expatriate community culture, and within their home culture once they have repatriated.

The description of culture shock presented here so far paints a rather bleak picture of the helpless victim suffering from the debilitating psychological effects of a serious illness. Although not glossing over the very serious consequences of culture shock, we can view it more positively as a

potentially profound experience leading to cultural learning, self-awareness, and personal growth. For example, Peter Adler (1975) suggested that the conflicts, problems, and frustrations associated with culture shock can result in “transitional experiences” for the international businessperson and accompanying family members, which “can be the source of higher levels of personality and professional development.” Cultural learning is most likely to occur under situations of high anxiety, such as is common in moderate to severe cases of culture shock. At lower levels of anxiety, the motivation to learn about the host culture is absent. But when anxiety, frustration, and pain are high, the motivation will be powerful to acquire new knowledge and skills, which can be used to reduce the anxiety. Moreover, culture shock encourages the sufferers to confront their own cultural heritage and to develop a new awareness of the degree to which they are products of it.

Although we are indebted to Adler for reminding us of the more positive consequences of culture shock, the suggestion that it can be growth-producing does have its limitations. As Richard Brislin has suggested, if the anxiety of culture shock is too high, “people may be so upset that they are unable to focus on new learning possibilities” (1981: 158). While a certain amount of anxiety can be positive, there is a point at which it can become dysfunctional. The anxiety of culture shock can interrupt work patterns, increase the number of bad solutions to problems, and impair decision making, planning, and personal relationships on one’s overseas assignments.

Ironically, some of the personality characteristics traditionally considered positive for businesspeople at home are the very traits that can most readily contribute to culture shock. To illustrate, many business leaders are type-A personalities, characterized by a high motivation to achieve, competitiveness, and a high level of time consciousness. However desirable these traits are at home, they can become liabilities when attempting to work globally. Wanting to achieve the greatest results in the shortest period of time, type-A personalities tend to be impatient, overly aggressive,

domineering, and self-centered. They often do not take the time to listen to others or study and adapt to the local cultural environment.

Impact upon Repatriation

As has been too often the case, many Western businesspeople fail to meet their overseas objectives because they are ill prepared to cope with culture shock. Yet, even for those who are successful at managing culture shock during their foreign assignment (i.e., by reaching stage 3 or 4), the phenomenon has an additional surprise in store—reverse culture shock, or what has come to be known as *reentry shock*. Nan Sussman found that expatriates who were the least prepared for repatriation, experienced greater distress than those who had a better understanding of it (2001). Most Westerners are not prepared for the enormous letdown they feel when returning home after an overseas assignment. In some cases, reentry shock—the disorientation faced when trying to reorient oneself to life and work in your own culture—can be more anxiety producing than the original culture shock. Here are some examples (from research done by Elizabeth Briody and Judith Beeber Chrisma) of reentry shock statements made by expatriates upon their return home:

- **Former Expatriate:** “I experienced a good deal of reverse culture shock in coming back (from Japan) ... There is disinterest on the part of the Americans with regard to how the Japanese do things. The attitude is, ‘Those (expletive) Japs!’ There is resentment about having to hear about the Japanese and how they are taking us to the cleaners. This occurs both in my social life where people essentially do not want to hear about the last four years of your life, and in my work life ... When you return to the U.S., you encounter a closed social system. Even with your former friends, it is hard to fit in with them. The disparity of your experience and their lack of experience with a foreign culture make it difficult to fit in.”
- **Former Expatriate Spouse:** “I was not happy when I first came back to the U.S. Jack was gone a lot. If we had still been overseas, friends would have known that Jack was away and would have called me to do things. This did not happen when we moved back. In addition, we were living quite close to my parents and they were always dropping in—a lot. I would have to drop whatever I was doing in order to entertain them. This turned out to be pretty stressful. Also, I was thrown right back in with suburban life—talking about idiotic things in a small town. In general, overseas people were more into foreign affairs, paying more attention to it. No one cared about foreign affairs in Ridgewood since they lived in their own little world there. A lot of the suburbia wives would find out that we had lived overseas and would poo poo it and then say how difficult it must have been for the kids to adjust...”
- **Former Expatriate Child:** “I noticed that American kids were more aggressive. I knew that I couldn’t fit in. I didn’t like football and baseball because I couldn’t understand them. I only knew soccer. It took me a long while to make friends (about 4 years).”

Although most international businesspeople will anticipate a certain number of problems and discomforts when entering a new cultural environment, they are frequently unprepared for the myriad of problems they will face when returning home. First, upon return, home life feels relatively boring and confining. Many foreign assignments of a year or more can be exciting in that they involve travel and learning all sorts of new things. Since coming home to “life as usual” can seem uninteresting by comparison, many returnees experience a generalized malaise or lack of interest in their lives.

Second, many U.S. businesspeople, after returning from a long assignment abroad, soon realize that one problem is finding a new niche in the corporate structure at home. Those who originally decided to send them abroad may no longer be on the scene; consequently, the corporation’s plan for how it would use them now may no longer exist.

Third, while trying to overcome the original dose of culture shock, many U.S. businesspeople tend to embellish (in some cases, grossly exaggerate) their fond memories of life in the United States. They remember that things are better made, cheaper, and cleaner and people are more efficient, polite, and competent. But upon reentry to the United States, many of these myths are shattered. One of the by-products of a successful adjustment to the host culture is that our old notions of our culture will never again be the same. After one lives for a while in Switzerland, the United States no longer seems to be the epitome of cleanliness; when compared with the Japanese, the typical American seems loud and boisterous; after returning from an extended stay in Germany you become painfully aware of how unprepared most Americans are to engage in an informed political discussion; after a stint in a developing nation, people in the United States seem rushed and impersonal. Somehow home isn't what one had remembered.

Fourth, one's standard of living may actually decrease when returning to the United States. Such luxuries as servants, large company houses, chauffeurs, live-in babysitters, and other perks used to entice people into an international assignment are likely to disappear. One is now faced with cutting one's own lawn and spending several hours each day commuting to and from work.

Fifth, in those cases in which U.S. businesspeople have made a successful adaptation to a third-world cultural environment, there can be additional problems of adjustment. The returnee and his or her family have seen, on a daily basis, the economic standards of people living in the host country. Per capita income may be no more than several hundred dollars a year; infant mortality may be 15 times as high as it is in the United States; disease and lack of medical facilities keep the average life expectancy to less than 40 years of age; government attention to human rights might be nonexistent; and the prospects of changing these conditions in any meaningful way are highly unlikely. And then, upon return, they encounter friends, colleagues, neighbors, and relatives complaining bitterly that they are unable to find at the grocery store the correct color of

toilet tissue for the downstairs bathroom. Such complaints stir up (1) considerable anger at how unaware and unappreciative most Americans are of their own material well-being and (2) guilt for having mouthed many of these same inane complaints at an earlier time.

Sixth, perhaps the most unsettling aspect of reentry shock is the almost total dearth of psychological support for the returnee and his or her household. When encountering the initial stage 2 culture shock during the foreign assignment, there were (it is hoped) some preparations, an understanding (however inadequately developed) that there would be rough times, and other expatriates (who were experiencing many of the same frustrations) who could provide reassurance and support. But when returning home, U.S. businesspeople and their families feel alone and unable to express their feelings with someone who has not been through the same type of experience. Friends and relatives whom they have not seen for months or even years will say, "Oh, I can't wait to hear about your stint in Singapore." But after listening half-heartedly for about two minutes, they will change the subject to a new TV show they have just seen. In short, returnees have a great need to share their overseas experiences (some of which may have been life-altering) with others, but frequently no one seems to be interested. Since the returnees have had the unusual experience of living and working abroad, many of their friends and acquaintances, whose lives may have gone on uninterrupted or changed in other ways, have no way of relating to these experiences. The result is a feeling of alienation from the returnees' own culture because they feel that they are not being understood.

MINIMIZING CULTURE SHOCK

Just about everyone living and working abroad for extended periods of time can expect to experience culture shock to some degree. Tourists and occasional (short-term) business travelers are by and

large shielded from some of the more debilitating effects of culture shock because their experiences are limited to hotels and restaurants geared to Westerners. Yet, those who must live and work in a foreign culture for extended periods of time are faced with new ways of behaving, thinking, and communicating. Even U.S. businesspeople who have lived and worked in a number of different countries claim that they have experienced culture shock in each country. For some, each subsequent assignment becomes a little easier, but for many, culture shock must be confronted for each new situation. Although there is no “quick fix” for culture shock, you can take a number of purposeful steps to minimize its negative impact.

Weigh the Alternatives

One very effective way of totally avoiding culture shock is to choose (or have your employer choose) to stay “stateside” or at home in the U.S. rather than enter the global business arena. Some people simply do not have the desire, inclination, or temperament for international assignments. There may be others who are suited for some foreign cultures but not others. Family matters (e.g., medical concerns, education issues, care of elderly parents) need to be considered carefully during the decision-making process because they may be “show stoppers”. The old Greek adage “Know thyself” could not be more appropriate than in the process of self-selection for an international assignment. Before deciding to live abroad, it is imperative to have a realistic grasp of your motives and feelings. If individuals possess a high degree of cross-cultural motivation, their adjustment and job performance abroad will be better (Black and Gregersen 1991; Mohr and Klein 2004; Chen et al. 2010). If people decide to move into the global arena solely on the basis of the lure of more money, a possible promotion, or worst of all, to put a little excitement into their less-than-adequate marriage, they will probably do themselves (and their organizations) a favor by staying home. International businesspeople (and any accompanying family members) who are most likely to do well abroad (1) have a realistic understanding of the problems and promises

of international business, (2) possess a number of important cross-cultural coping skills, and (3) see the world marketplace as providing vast opportunities for professional and personal growth. Those who cannot meet these criteria may be so ill-suited to living and working abroad that they would be virtually unable to overcome the debilitating effects of culture shock.

Prepare Carefully

For those who do select the international business arena, the best single piece of advice for minimizing culture shock is to be prepared. The more thorough the preparation for an overseas assignment, the fewer surprises there will be, and, consequently, the smaller will be the accumulated negative effect. A major factor in adjusting to a foreign cultural environment is the degree of familiarity with the host culture. It is important to recognize that culture shock will never be totally avoided, but it can be minimized through careful preparation. To prepare for an international business encounter, refer to the major substantive chapters of this book, which really suggest a fourfold approach.

First, as suggested in Chapter 1, a general understanding of the concept of culture can provide a fuller appreciation of other cultures, regardless of where one might be conducting business. For example, that cultures are learned (as opposed to being acquired genetically) should remind the international businessperson and expatriate family members that although culturally different people have learned different things, they are no less capable of learning efficiently. The concept of an integrated culture—where many or most of the parts of the culture are interconnected—should serve to convince us that all cultures, no matter how incomprehensible they may appear at first, do in fact have a consistently logical structure and should not be given such disparaging epithets as “primitive,” “savage,” “crazy,” “stupid,” and so on. And we should realize that our culture is so thoroughly internalized that it can have very real effects on our physiological functioning. These and other general concepts—which hold equally true for