

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

CONTENTS: CULTURE & IDENTITY-STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK

General Information & Additional Resources.....	1
What is Culture?.....	2
Culture in a U.S. Context.....	3
Personal and Cultural Identities.....	4
Identities in Context.....	4
Stereotypes.....	5
Cultural Adjustment.....	6
Reactions to Cultural Differences.....	6
Preparing for Cultural Differences.....	6
Getting Outside the “Study Abroad Bubble”.....	7
Working Through Culture Shock.....	7
Coming Home (Re-Entry Adjustment).....	7
Cultural Adjustment in Emojis.....	8
Dig Deeper: OnLine Culture Training Resources.....	8

GENERAL INFORMATION & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Going abroad to learn about another culture? You are—but many returned study abroad students report that they learned as much, if not more, about themselves, the culture(s) they come from, and the U.S. as a whole as they did about their host culture.

To learn about a new culture, you first need to understand yourself as an individual, your cultural identity, and the cultural values widely associated with the United States. To quote Anaïs Nin, “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are”.

This section of the Study Abroad Handbook contains resources for learning about individual identity, cultural identity, and cultural adjustment. A few notes:

- We use the phrases “U.S. culture”, rather than “American culture” and “U.S. American” rather than “American” in recognition that countries in Central and South America are also part of the Americas.
- We use the phrase “dominant U.S. culture” to refer to widely recognized ideas about cultural patterns and values associated with the U.S. We recognize that these patterns and values largely stem from traditional White culture, and that not all individuals and

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

U.S. cultural groups see themselves in these cultural patterns, but most people are aware of them.

- We understand that there are many cultures within the U.S., each with its own cultural patterns and values, and that individuals may have intersecting identities within multiple cultural groups.

Find additional resources for specific identity groups on the [Your Identity + Study Abroad](#) section of our website.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture refers to values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, customs, learning styles, communication styles, history/historical interpretations, achievements, accomplishments, technology, the arts, literature, etc.—the sum total of what a particular group of people has created together, share, and transmit. *R. Michael Paige*

Click these links for short videos and articles look at culture from a variety of perspectives:

[What is Culture? \(1 minute\)](#)

Personal definitions of culture from international exchange students.

[7 Aspects of Culture \(4 minutes\)](#)

[American Culture: Traditions and Customs of the United States \(10 minute read\)](#)

This article considers several aspects of dominant U.S. culture referenced in the previous video in a broad U.S. context.

[How Do We Understand Our Own Culture \(5 minutes\)](#)

Examples of how culture is learned and how to recognize your own cultural assumptions.

[Hofstede's Dimensions of National Culture \(7 minutes\)](#)

Two of the videos above mention Geert Hofstede, whose theories of cultural dimensions are used widely, particularly in international business. This video briefly explains Hofstede's dimensions via the "Lord of the Rings".

[Compare Countries](#)

Once you have a grasp of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, use this comparison tool to see similarities and differences between dominant U.S. culture and the culture where you are headed!

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

CULTURE IN A U.S. CONTEXT

White U.S. American students sometimes say they “have no culture”. On the other hand, Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Native American, Hmong, and Asian American/Pacific Islander students, as well as international students, often must switch between cultures on a regular basis. If we are not aware of our own culture, we may use our cultural lenses to judge and evaluate other cultures.

In the 1980’s, L. Robert Kohls proposed a list and explanation of [13 “American” values](#) (15 minute read). This list is still used today to introduce international students to “U.S. culture”, but some argue that these values are most representative of White culture.

STOP & THINK:

- Do you see yourself and your primary cultural group(s) in all these values?
- Some of them?
- Which ones fit and which do not?

Author Colin Woodard proposed 11 distinct U.S. sub-cultures in his book “**American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America**”, [summarized in this article](#) (5 minute read).

STOP & THINK:

- Do you find a better fit here?
- If so, does it match the geographic region where you grew up?

Dig Deeper:

[What’s Up with Culture: US-American Values](#) (5 minute read)

This article lists many common perceptions of U.S. Americans, both positive and negative, and includes a chart of how dominant U.S. cultural values might compare/contrast with values held in other cultures:

[Countries and Their Cultures: United States of America](#) (20 minute read)

This article on U.S. cultures and history is written from a non-U.S. perspective.

- What do you think is accurate?
- Inaccurate?
- Is anything missing?

Also on the Countries and Their Cultures site: [Multicultural America](#), with articles on 100s (really!) of U.S. ethnic and racial groups.

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

PERSONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

Identity is what it means to be yourself in a specific context. Personal identity is about defining, for ourselves, who we are. We define ourselves:

- by traits: optimistic, shy, athletic, honest, kind . . .
- by our interests and roles: a dancer, a gamer, a student, a sister

In cultural identity, also known as social identity, we define ourselves in relation to groups we are part of, such as family, race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, sex, gender, sexuality, religion, social class, age, and geographic location.

[Defining Culture](#) (3 minutes)

This video explores how personal and cultural identities intersect.

The [Your Identity + Study Abroad](#) page of the study abroad website has resources related to:

- Gender + Sexuality
- International Students
- Non-traditional Students
- Race + Ethnicity
- Religion + Spirituality
- Socioeconomic Status
- Students with Disabilities
- Transfer Students

IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT

We sometimes think of identity as something that is set, but identities are fluid. Certain aspects of your identity may be more important in certain contexts than in others. For example, in your host country:

You may first be viewed as U.S. American , an identity you may not consider a lot at home. You may be asked to speak on behalf of “Americans” in a variety of situations, from the grocery store to the classroom to your living situation.	OR	You may not fit the broad U.S. American (often understood as White) stereotype in your host country and may find yourself asserting your U.S. identity and challenging the stereotypes of what U.S. culture is.
--	-----------	--

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

You may, at least visually, be part of a racial or ethnic majority for the first time.	OR	You may, at least visually, be part of a racial or ethnic minority for the first time.
You may find that you can express your sex and gender identities more freely than you do in the U.S.	OR	You may experience that women often receive unwanted attention (for example, cat-calling), or that it is not safe to be open about your sex or gender identity due to discriminatory laws and negative local attitudes.
You may be assumed by the people in your host country to be wealthy simply because of your presence/ability to travel—even if you had to work multiple jobs, apply for every available scholarships and/or take out loans to participate.	AND/OR	You may find that many other U.S. and international students at your host site ARE wealthy —they can travel every weekend, buy expensive souvenirs and eat out for most meals, while you are carefully budgeting each dollar you spend.

Comments, blogs and videos from returned students about their experiences are on the [Your Identity + Study Abroad](#) pages of the CIE website.

Keep in mind that you are a short-term visitor in your host country, and the culture there is not going to adapt to your expectations and understanding related to identity. Thinking in advance about how the prominence of different aspects of your identity may change in the context of your host country can help you prepare to interact safely abroad.

Dig Deeper: Completing an “[Identity Wheel](#)” can help you visually explore what aspects of your identity are most important to you right now. Revisiting the wheel while you are abroad can help you see those parts of your identity that are coming to the fore in your new context.

STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are widely held, oversimplified, and often inaccurate, ideas about a people belonging to a specific group. You may have ideas about people from your host country based on stereotypes you have heard. People in other countries also have stereotypes of who you are, based solely on where you come from. This video introduces you to a few of the most common negative stereotypes of US tourists abroad:

[The Top Ten Complaints About American Tourists](#) (3 minutes)

Dig Deeper: This article, written for international students considering college in the U.S, lists 12 common U.S. stereotypes with examples of where they come from:

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

[Cultural Differences in the USA](#) (10 minute read)

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Studying abroad can be one of the most exhilarating learning experiences of your life AND it can be a series of bewildering and frustrating incidents that leave you longing for home. Our culture influences who we are and how we relate to the world. We have learned how things “should be” and how people “should act”. What happens when we suddenly lose those cues that orient us to situations of daily life? **This psychological discomfort is commonly known as “culture shock.” It is a stress reaction to a new situation.**

While uncomfortable, experiencing cultural differences and working through phases of cultural adjustment can be powerful learning opportunities. You gain self-understanding and personal growth, as well as insight into what it means to be a U.S. American and into how the rest of the world’s population lives and thinks. Sometimes experiences that are most challenging at the time are most rewarding in the long run.

REACTIONS TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Stress is a logical reaction to differences we encounter in a new environment. Luckily, it is only one phase in the process of adjusting to a new culture, whether it is a new college campus or a new country. The phases you might go through in this process include the following:

- Being fascinated with all the new things you are experiencing.
- Feeling uncomfortable because you don’t belong.
- Rejecting the new culture and people as being strange.
- Learning to decipher new cultural behavior and customs.
- Accepting and enjoying the new culture.

Your reactions to these phases may influence how you relate to local citizens. Being excited about new behavior and customs can pave the way for positive interaction. Rejecting “strange” customs may perpetuate the stereotypes noted in the “Top Ten Complaints” video above and make it difficult to connect with people.

PREPARING FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

To begin, learn as much as possible about where you are going. Read guidebooks, international newspapers and magazines, novels, plays, poetry; listen to radio and podcasts from/about the country; stream films, newscasts, and other programs produced there. Talk with international students and past participants from your program. Do the Culture Learning exercises and readings in your BlugoldsAbroad account.

STUDY ABROAD HANDBOOK: CULTURE & IDENTITY

Have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish by going abroad. Answering the following questions and doing the online goal-setting exercise in your BlugoldsAbroad account will help you define your priorities.

- Who am I? (Awareness of my personal beliefs and attitudes.)
- Where do I come from? (Awareness of own/general U.S. cultural beliefs and customs.)
- Where am I going? (Awareness of other cultures' customs, behaviors, and values.)
- What am I going for? (Interest in other countries, to see famous sights, to leave the U.S., to impress my friends.)
- What am I willing to consider? (How open will I be to different ways of doing things? Will I "try on" some of the behavior and values of the local population?)

GETTING OUTSIDE THE “STUDY ABROAD BUBBLE”

You are going abroad to meet new people and really immerse yourself in your new country—right? Most students want to do this, but once abroad, they find themselves more comfortable hanging out with other students from home. This article has practical suggestions for how you can pop the bubble: [Getting Outside the Study Abroad Bubble](#) (2 minute read)

It can be uncomfortable, but past students say it is totally worth it!

WORKING THROUGH CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock can happen during the first few days in a new culture, but it is more common after you've been somewhere a few weeks or months. Whenever it strikes, it is perfectly normal, and it usually only lasts a little while. Don't give in to that urge to change your plane ticket and come home! Instead, realize that culture shock is a specific type of stress. Think about how you handle stressful situations at home. A few possibilities include exercising, talking/e-mailing with friends or family, journaling, joining a club or activity, or planning a weekend trip. Above all, give yourself time to adjust.

Dig Deeper: Check out the [Resilient Traveling website](#) from the University of Michigan for more information and resources for coping with culture shock.

COMING HOME (RE-ENTRY ADJUSTMENT)

People often spend a lot of time preparing to go abroad but not much time thinking about returning home. Many returned study abroad students will tell you they had a more difficult time adjusting to being home than they did adjusting abroad. See the [“Returned Students”](#) section on our website for information and resources to help you integrate your experiences abroad with your life at home.

