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# Cultural adaptation in outdoor programming.

*Sheila M. Fabrizio*

*University of New Hampshire*

*James T. Neill*

*Wilderness*

## Abstract

Outdoor programs often intentionally provide a different culture and the challenge of working out how to adapt. Failure to adapt, however, can cause symptoms of culture shock, including homesickness, negative personal behavior, and interpersonal conflict. This article links cross-cultural and outdoor programming literature and provides case examples in order to illustrate the importance of facilitating outdoor participants' cultural adaptation. Based on cross-cultural literature, successful adaptation is more likely to occur when there is adequate preparation for the new environment, understanding of the new cultural norms, and an appreciation of typical stages of cultural adaptation (i.e., honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and resolution). These individual stages of cultural adaptation are interwoven with the typical stages of group development. By proactively using models of cross-cultural adaptation and group development, outdoor programs can better facilitate participants' cultural adjustment skills.

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In many ways, entering an outdoor program is like entering another country. Participants in outdoor programs embark on adventures by leaving the comforts of home and entering new, challenging physical and social environments. Whether it is an expedition, summer camp, or sail training voyage, outdoor program participants leave normalcy behind and enter a situation with new sociocultural norms. Outdoor participants often face similar adjustment processes to foreign students, immigrants, and overseas workers. The environmental and cultural differences require considerable adaptation on the part of a participant; Normal behaviors and expectations do not necessarily apply; Participants need to learn new skills, establish new relationships, and redefine self-identity in the new context.

A shift in environmental context can enhance an individual's learning potential (e.g., Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). For this reason, many outdoor learning programs intentionally try to create a "place apart" (Richards, 1977). For example, outdoor programs often intentionally embrace heterogeneous groupings (Bacon, 1988; Smith, 1983), stretch participants' comfort level (Luckner & Nadler, 1997), and offer novel and challenging adventure-based activities (Walsh & Golins, 1976). Ultimately, participants' success in outdoor program environments relies on each individuals' capacity to adapt and function in the new and changing circumstances (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). However, it is a major responsibility of outdoor program designers and facilitators to provide healthy opportunity for successful adaptation.

Adaptation to outdoor environments may be relatively easy for participants who are familiar with outdoor settings or have had similar experiences, but for those who have had little exposure to the

outdoors the process can create a myriad of personal and interpersonal difficulties (Richards, Peel, Smith, & Owen, 2001; Virden & Walker, 1999). Failure to adapt causes difficulties for both participants and program leaders. Not adapting to a program's environment can cause stress or "culture shock," potentially inducing a wide range of physiological and psychological reactions (Guyton, 1986). These reactions can in themselves cause further stress and anxiety (Winkelman, 1994). A major purpose of program design and facilitation is to provide an adequate level of comfort and support so that participants move through culture shock, adapt expectations, and succeed in learning new skills or achieving other program objectives.

Participant coping difficulties can manifest in different ways and with varying intensity (Neill & Heubeck, 1997). Participants experiencing culture shock may have significant difficulty with their surroundings, interacting with others, and accomplishing tasks. Stress symptoms in outdoor programs include homesickness (Neill & Heubeck, 1997; Thurber, 1995<sup>1</sup>), negative attitudes towards the program, instructors or group, refusal to participate in program activities, and other anti-social behavior (e.g., see Handley, 1994, 1997; Reddrop, 1997). Extreme cases of culture shock can result in participants

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<sup>1</sup> Thurber (1995) found in a study of boys at an American summer camp that 83% of boys reported feeling at least some degree homesick on at least one day of the 2 to 4 week camps. Consistent homesickness was less prevalent, but still notable, with 12% of the boys reporting an average level of homesickness above mid-way on an 11-point scale. Highly homesick individuals were more likely to report higher levels of depression and anxiety, be younger, have attended fewer camps previously, and have had experienced homesickness in the past.

experiencing ongoing depression, frustration and/or anger, and ultimately can result in withdrawal, dismissal from the program, or psychosomatic manifestation of illness/injury. Failure to cope with a program's cultural and physical environment can lead to problematic readjustment on return to the home environment following outdoor experiences and can have potentially serious psychological consequences for the participant (Richards, 1977; Ringer, 2002).

## **Culture Shock**

Anyone who has traveled outside of his or her hometown has probably experienced culture shock to some degree. Whether it is a Maine farmer visiting New York City, an English foreign aid worker visiting an African refugee camp, a Yugoslavian student attending a New Zealand university, or an inner-city youth going on a wilderness expedition, each person is being confronted with significantly unfamiliar sights, environments, lifestyles, and behaviors. The process of culture shock is underway when a person is feeling uncomfortable about being in unfamiliar circumstances.

The term "culture shock" was coined in the academic literature by Oberg (1960). Culture shock refers to the normal and universal behavioral, emotional, mental and physical response to the unfamiliar (Rhinesmith, 1985; Winkelman, 1994). Culture shock is understood to derive from the challenge of new cultural surroundings and loss of a familiar environment (Rhinesmith, 1985). Nowadays culture shock is treated as a temporary stress reaction in response to salient psychological and physical rewards not being readily available and therefore being difficult to control and predict (Furnham, 2003). The experience of culture shock can lead to non-normative reactions to new situations, exacerbate underlying personal dysfunctions, and interfere with potential learning and development (Winkelman, 1994). To move beyond culture shock, individuals need to develop adaptation skills (Black & Mendenhall, 1990).

## **Stages of cultural adaptation**

Culture shock is not a singular incident but rather it seems to progress through identifiable stages. Researchers have identified from three to eight phases (Oberg, 1960; Pederson, 1995). In this article we use Winkelman's four phases (1994) (see Table 1), but our selection is somewhat arbitrary and other cultural adaptation models could also be applied to outdoor programs.

Winkelman's four stages of cultural adaptation are: 1) Honeymoon or tourist phase, 2) Crisis or cultural shock phase, 3) Adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase, and 4) Adaptation, resolution,

or acculturation phase. A person entering a new cultural environment can be observed going through each of the culture shock stages in succession, although the proposed process of sequential progression is theoretical and yet to be well tested by research (Spering, 2001). The intensity and rate of progression through each phase is dependent on the severity of the cultural shift and the participant's level of experience and skill in the given environment (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980; Furnham, 2003). A participant who is comfortable in the outdoor setting and with program norms may experience each of the first three stages briefly and easily reach the adaptation stage (stage 4). In contrast, a participant who is uncomfortable in the program setting may get stuck in the crisis or culture shock phase (stage 2). Without appropriate support and facilitation this participant may be unable to reach cultural adjustment (stage 3).

An example of a participant's inability to move through the second stage of cultural adaptation was found in program feedback materials from the Bear Hill 4-H Outdoor Leadership Camp in New Hampshire (USA). A young teen's inability to adapt resulted in her departure from the program. She summarized her experience by saying "I was just too uncomfortable to enjoy myself and get anything out of the program." During the subsequent debrief she expressed overwhelming unease about sleeping in the cabins without electricity, being out in the 'middle of nowhere,' and the constant togetherness of group members.

## **Cultural adaptation and stages of group development**

Individual experiences during outdoor programs occur in relation to group processes (Ewert & Heywood, 1991; Garvey, 1999). Like cultural adaptation, group development can be described as an evolution through predictable and sequential stages. Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) well-known four-stage model, forming, storming, norming, and performing model is commonly used to describe the development of outdoor education groups (Jensen, 1979; Priest & Gass, 1997). The correspondence between Winkelman's (1994) phases of cultural adaptation and Tuckman and Jensen's stages of group development is shown in Table 1. Simultaneous discussion of the two models provides a glimpse at the importance of individual adaptation within the context of group development. Successful individual adaptation allows for smoother progression of an outdoor group through to the performing stage in which they can successfully tackle difficult tasks and objectives. Likewise a group which successfully evolves to the performing stage is likely to provide support for the successful adaptation of individuals to the new circumstances.

For simplicity's sake, we restrict our discussion to similarities between Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) group development phases and Winkelman's (1994) cultural adaptation model. Future extensions could include analyzing the relationship between different models of group development (e.g., Kerr & Gass, 1995; McAvoy, Mitten, Stringer, Steckart, & Sproles, 1996), different models of cultural adaptation (e.g., Westwood & Borgen, 1988), leadership style (Priest & Gass, 1997), or other models of psychosocial change such as rites of passage (Beames, 2004; Bell, 2003). Also note that a fifth group development phase, adjourning, has been added to Tuckman and Jensen's stages of group development which could be related to a fifth cultural adaptation phase called reintegration or transfer.

**Honeymoon or tourist phase - Forming**

The honeymoon or tourist cultural adaptation phase is characterized by participants' enjoyment of a new environment (Pederson, 1995; Winkleman, 1994). Tourists' experiences in the honeymoon may never end, they may continue to be stimulated by the new environment, move onto another new environment, or go home before entering the cultural shock phase (stage 2). Participants starting an outdoor program often exhibit feelings of excitement, euphoria, and optimism as they anticipate attractive aspects of the adventure. They may also experience trepidation and anxiety (Ewert, 1986) in this first stage but it is often regarded positively. The honeymoon or tourist cultural adaptation phase generally occurs during the forming group development stage. Participants involved in this initial stage of group development are stimulated by the new social environment, especially getting to know one another and learning about their new tasks, but group members are yet to be fully committed to the group's direction and may prefer to work alone (Priest & Gass, 1997). Participants typically spend the first days of outdoor program observing group members,

gathering cultural information, and seeking guidance so as to understand group dynamics and expectations. People need to figure out social boundaries in the new context and their role within the newly formed community.

**Crisis or culture shock phase – Storming**

The crisis or culture shock phase may emerge as a full-blown incident or as a series of escalating personal problems, negative experiences, and negative reactions to people and tasks (Winkelman, 1994). In an outdoor experience, this phase may occur as early as the first day or be delayed until well into the program. Although individual cultural crisis reactions vary, there are typical features. Cross-cultural crisis or culture shock often becomes apparent when minor issues become major, such as preoccupation with cleanliness of drinking water, food, or housing or when irritations between group members or between staff and students become more obvious. A participant in cultural crisis is likely to experience increasing frustration, disappointment, confusion, impatience and tension. The size of the cultural gap, individual adaptation skills, and group dynamics all significantly determine the severity of this cultural crisis phase (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980; Furnham, 2003; Spering, 2001).

On an outdoor program, the cultural crisis phase may manifest itself by a group member refusing to participate in activities and/or interact with others. Severe reactions may lead to feelings of helplessness and ultimately result in withdrawal from the group and possibly the program. Alternatively, an individual struggling with this phase may become hostile and overly dominant in an attempt to alter the social environment to be more consistent with his/her comfort zone. The full range of psychological defensive and coping mechanisms may be invoked in participants confronted with outdoor program challenges (e.g., see

Table 1.

Correspondence between Winkelman's Four Phases of Cultural Adaptation (1994) and Tuckman and Jensen's Four Stages of Group Development (1977)

Winkelman's (1994) Four Phases of Cultural Adaptation	Tuckman & Jensen's (1977) Four Stages of Group Development
Honeymoon or tourist	Forming
Crisis or cultural shock	Storming
Adjustment, reorientation and gradual recovery	Norming
Adaptation, resolution or acculturation	Performing

Allison, 2001; Handley, 1994, 1997; Neill & Heubeck, 1997; Richards, 1997; Richards et al., 2001; Ringer, 2002; Ringer & Gillis, 1995).

Cultural crisis reactions in outdoor programs most often occur during the storming stage of group development. Storming is characterized by the group struggling to find ways of working together and managing tasks. Group struggle is closely interrelated with personal and interpersonal issues and vice-versa (Ringer, 2002). Participant behaviors can push the limits of acceptability as individuals in the group try to find a personal place in the program and acceptable ways of interacting with others. Group issues during the storming stage often include status and power, communication styles, group values, and problem-solving styles. Group polarization may occur, with decisions based on powerful people's opinions. If negative interpersonal interactions run out of control, storming can escalate into chaos (e.g., Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif's (1954/1961) famous Robber's Cave summer camp experiments). If the chaos is not resolved, the group behavior can cause physical and psychological trauma (e.g., William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, 1954).

#### **Adjust and reorientation phase - Norming**

Finding a way to promote healthy individual and group development is the challenge of the third phase. Individuals need to find a meaningful role in the group and to make personal adjustments in attitude and behavior, whilst the group needs to manage the storm by developing a characteristic and mutually acceptable approach to social interactions and tackling problems.

The cultural adaptation, adjustment and reorientation phase occurs when people begin to accept the cross-cultural challenge and process their reactions to the cultural situation rather than blocking, denying, reacting or withdrawing. To function effectively within the new environment, individuals must develop problem-solving skills for handling cultural challenges and accept new constraints with a positive attitude (Storti, 1990, 1995).

Outdoor program participants reach the adjustment or reorientation phase when they accept the physical, cultural, and social constraints of the program and understand that discomforts are actually a result of personal lack of adaptation to existing conditions. Participants observing peer and educators' coping skills can be aided in understanding their own reactions. Once participants realize that their problems are due to a lack of understanding of the new environment, a greater capacity to engage with the new culture emerges, negative reactions and responses are reduced, new cultural skills developed, and new opportunities for personal and group growth

emerge. During this stage, problems do not cease but participants gain more cross-cultural understanding and take a more positive approach to handling problems that may arise.

Adjustment or reorientation corresponds to the norming stage of group development. The norming stage establishes a characteristic set of norms, particularly with regard to social interaction and task management. The norming stage is about the group attempting to solve problems, making mistakes, and then improving its way of operating. Progression to this stage is by no means guaranteed. As with the adaptation adjustment and reorientation cultural adaptation theme, norming basically involves a proactive searching for the best ways to handle the new situation.

#### **Adaptation, resolution or acculturation phase - Performing**

The final phase of cultural immersion is adaptation, resolution, or acculturation. This is achieved when a person has acquired the skills and attitudes necessary to interact, resolve problems, and complete tasks successfully in the new environment. Complete cultural assimilation is difficult and not necessarily a goal for outdoor programs, as one would be giving up previous identities for the identity of the new environment. More often, in outdoor programs the desired adaptational outcome is successful integration of participants into the program culture and physical environment such that optimal learning and skill development can occur.

The cultural adaptation phase corresponds to the performing group development stage. Performing refers to a group's mastery of task requirements and cohesion amongst team members. Reaching the performing stage is difficult, particularly in short programs. In outdoor programs, the group's attainment of the performing stage is sometimes signaled by handing over decision-making to the group or allowing participants to engage in unsupervised activities (e.g., an unaccompanied expedition).

#### **Cross-cultural experiences and cultural adaptation**

Culture can be understood as the man-made aspects of environment, including both physically-made and socially constructed aspects of environment (Spering, 2001). Cross-cultural experiences occur when individuals enter novel cultural and physical environments (Bochner, 1982) or when two or more individuals from distinctly different environments (i.e., with different views, attitudes, ideas, and behaviors) interact. The most familiar example of cross-cultural experiences is when a person travels abroad and interacts with a foreign culture (Storti, 1990, 1995).

Stepping into many different environments, including internet listservs, Japanese onsen, Islamic mosques, American summer camps and other outdoor education programs, involves cross-cultural interactions between people who may seem to distinctly differ in how they view the world, react to situations, and behave.

Cultural adaptation refers to the process of developing positive adaptations to new cultural environments. The need for cultural adaptation stems from the intra-personal conflict that occurs when a person encounters unfamiliar cultural environments. Adaptation involves changes in one's thinking as well as in behaviors, thus a combination of cognitive and behavioral strategies is recommended (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998; Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker, 1999; Westwood & Borgen, 1988).

### **Cultural adaptation in outdoor programs**

Outdoor program participants need to adapt to a new program culture and a new social culture, both of which evolve and change as an outdoor experience unfolds. Ideally, the process of adapting to an outdoor program culture is educational and developmental. This requires cultural adaptation, including negotiating culture shock. Although culture shock is often associated with negative consequences, it may, in mild doses, be valuable for self-development and personal growth (Furnham, 2003). Indeed, temporary experience of culture shock is often an intended part of most outdoor programs (Richards, 1977). However, taking people to the edges of their comfort zones is a double-edged sword, with as much potential for harm as there is potential for growth. To illustrate ways in which program culture and social culture can each contribute to culture shock and cultural adaptation in outdoor programs, a more indepth discussion with examples is provided.

#### **Outdoor program culture**

Outdoor programs often present unique traditions, norms and idiosyncrasies. For example, when staff members and participants arrive at Bear Hill Camp in New Hampshire, they enter an American "summer camp" culture as well as a culture specific to Bear Hill Camp with its own norms, boundaries, values, and expectations. Bear Hill Camp staff and campers sleep in rustic cabins with six other people, there is no electricity, they rise at 7 am, attend flag raising, say grace before sitting at family-style meals, follow a code of ethics based on six pillars of character, sing traditional Bear Hill songs while waiting to enter the dining hall, and participate in Thursday night candle lighting ceremonies. The camp has established many of these cultural norms over a period of 70 years, while others have been recently adopted as a result of individual staff members' influence. More broadly,

Bear Hill Camp is reflective of North American culture and its extensive summer camp tradition (Grayson, 2001; Hammerman, 1980).

Along with adjusting to cultural norms, members of an outdoor community must adapt to a new physical environment. The modern technological comforts of home are often exchanged for outdoor accommodations during a camp or trip program. Meals are usually modest and may be cooked on a camping stove or open fire. Outhouses or cat holes might replace flush toilets, showers are sparse, and gear minimal. The means to conduct daily activities are dramatically altered and participants are challenged to find ways of operating in the new living conditions.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that physical needs (basic needs such as health and security) must be addressed before social and personal development occurs (Carver & Scheier, 2000). However, adjusting to the even the basic rigors of outdoor activities and living can be physically taxing. Exposure to the elements, rustic living, and increased physical activity can lead to exhaustion and fatigue, increasing both physical and mental stress (Neill & Heubeck, 1995).

Cognitive fatigue is a major aspect of cultural shock (Guthrie, 1975). The new outdoor culture demands a conscious effort to understand things that were unconsciously processed in the home environment (Winkelman, 1994). The simple act of getting a glass of water becomes a process of survival-related information processing and cultural monitoring. Mental exertion is expended to understand group and program dynamics combined with physical demands of an outdoor experience. Resulting stress can lead to mental and emotional fatigue or burnout leading to social withdrawal, particularly in the latter part of a day or program (Winkelman, 1994). Cognitive fatigue in outdoor programs can also manifest as homesickness, physical illness, and/or excessive lethargy (Neill & Heubeck, 1997).

#### **Outdoor program social culture**

Participants of outdoor programs face, among other challenges, the need for social adjustment. Upon entering a program, participants leave established social support structures and enter a social realm often quite different from home environments (Richards, 1977; Walsh & Golins, 1976). An outdoor excursion offers a new social context whether with a pre-established group or an entirely new group (Richards, 1977; Ringer, 2002). Many outdoor programs intentionally encourage participants to develop new relationships outside their normal sphere. In new settings individuals are often free of home pressures and identities, thus providing opportunity to explore and develop new social relationships and social roles. In a sense, outdoor participants leave behind their

everyday life and enter a “social wilderness” in which previous social norms are not readily available or replicable (Richards, 1977; Waskul, 1998).

Within this “social wilderness,” participants in an outdoor program group develop a unique culture which defines its norms and values. These norms are somewhat pre-established by broader culture and program culture, but ultimately each group is unique in its guidelines for individual behavior and group interaction (Morrison, 1994; Richards, 1977; Schoel & Maizell, 2002; Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988).

Adapting to a new social group requires a willingness to learn the origin of other people’s personal views, beliefs and behaviors, as well as openness to new experiences and differing cultures (Harris, 1995). The source of difficulty in social adaptation is the instinctive assumption that everyone is like one’s self

(Storti, 1990, 1995). Before encountering people from other cultures, a person has no basis to think other people would behave or think differently from what he/she has previously seen. Kohls (1984, cited in Storti, 1990, p. 48) has stated, “that deep down we assume under normal circumstances we all think about and perceive the world in basically the same way.”

Storti (1990) developed a model of cultural adaptation using a behavioral approach (see Figure 1). Storti’s model is illustrated by the following experience of an Interlocken camper. The Interlocken Center for Experiential Learning (USA) offers summer camp experiences to a diverse population of children and staff members from America and abroad. A 15 year old camper, Molly, discusses a cross-cultural encounter with a fellow camper:

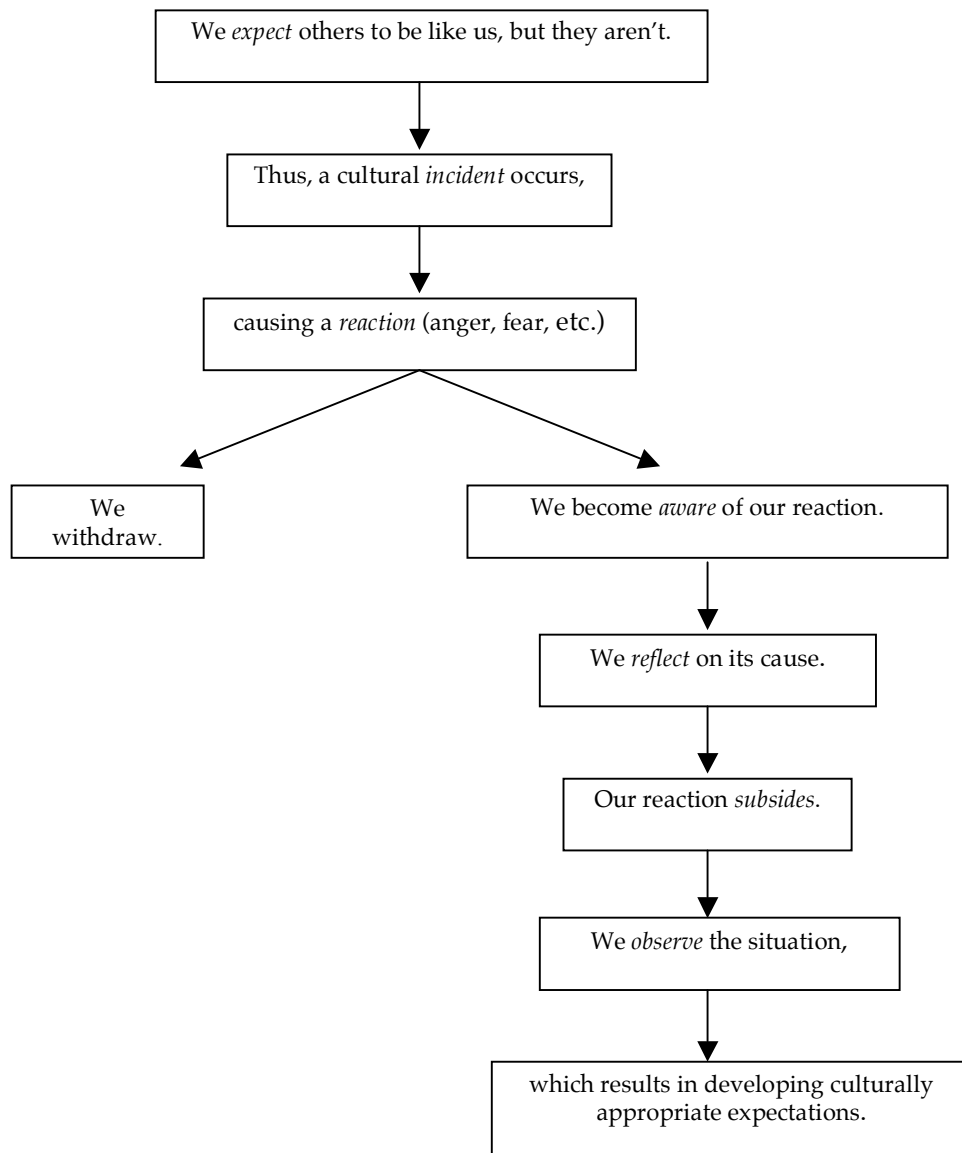


Figure 1. Cultural Adaptation Process (adapted from Storti, 1990)

Last year there was a girl in my tent from California, and she was deep into like, almost gang stuff. She wasn't violent or anything, but she was really difficult to live with. Everything she did, from her accent to the way she held herself, was very California, and I think the most interesting thing was watching her from the time she came in to when she left. She changed a lot; at first she was, like "I'm not doing this stuff, this is ridiculous, I want to go home," but by the end she was really upset about leaving. And even though I didn't get along with her very well, I look back and I just laugh. It wouldn't have been the same if I'd met her at home; I wouldn't have given her the time of day, but because I had to be around her, I picked up little things from her, and she made me laugh, even though sometimes I wanted to smack her. That was an interesting encounter. (Hill & Herman, 1998, p. 75)

Molly's personal account exhibits a positive outcome of the adjustment process. Although it had been far from easy, Molly identified cultural differences and understood the personal conflicts were due to their differences. When incidents arose, Molly identified feelings of anger wanting to "smack" the other girl. She was aware of her reaction and was able to reflect on its cause; the girls' differing home environments and culture. She exhibited an ability to observe the situation, including personal changes her cabin mate went through, and learnt from the "California girl." In contrast, if Molly had not been able to identify the cause of the cultural conflict her anger may have resulted in direct disputes between the girls and positive adaptation would probably have been less likely.

### **Cultural adaptation training**

Training with a social-learning focus, combining cognitive and behavioral approaches has proven most effective in preparing participants for cross-cultural interactions (Mak, et al., 1998, 1999; Storti, 1990, 1995). However, mastery of cultural adaptation does not happen easily and generally requires well-structured training opportunities with plenty of practice (Mak, et al., 1998, 1999; Westwood & Borgen, 1988).

The process of facilitating cultural adaptation requires a proactive and constructive approach (Reese, 1999). Based on cross-cultural adaptation literature, it can be suggested that successful adaptation can be achieved by supporting participants' preparation for the new environment, understanding of new cultural norms, typical stages of adaptation, and adaptation processes that are likely to occur (Taft, 1977;

Winkelman, 1994). Cultural adaptation in various settings can be facilitated by awareness of stages of cultural shock, use of coping skills for resolving crises, support structures for guidance, and acceptance that some personal change and behavioral adjustment may be necessary for adapting to a new environment.

Aspects of cross-cultural training programs worth considering for inclusion in adventure-based programs include pre-experience preparation, support structures during the experience, experiential exercises such as role-plays, and post-experience debriefing. Many well-administered outdoor programs already provide variations of such resources and training mechanisms.

### **Pre-experience preparation**

Pre-experience preparation can be provided for both staff and participants. For staff, it is recommended to center on developing their understanding of participants' individual and cultural backgrounds. For participants, it is particularly helpful to foster an awareness of the upcoming program and possible adaptation challenges they may encounter. Pre-experience preparation of participants and staff allows a basic, common foundation of understanding and awareness between the groups, pre-empting and averting potential conflicts.

Preparation of staff members may enable them to appropriately support and guide participants through the adaptation process. Providing adequate participant information to staff members can be achieved by acquiring participant profiles through interviewing, questionnaires, or informational sessions (e.g., open house, site visit). This information can be used to provide insight into participants' demographic background and personality.

Assistance in deciphering participant information is important for avoiding the possibility of pre-conceived biases towards a participant. In training staff members, it is important to explain how human behavior is a product of both biological make-up and environmental experiences. Together these factors combine to create individual personality characteristics, which influence behaviors. For example, an introvert will react differently than an extrovert to certain cultural behaviors (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Likewise, urban and rural participants may react differently to stimuli, have different expectations of group members, varying understanding of program experiences, and exhibit different behaviors as a result, at least partly, of past experiences and the environment in which they grew up. It is important to explore various cultural aspects of personality including self-identities relating to one's country, region, socioeconomic status, home environment, previous experiences, religion, group

affiliations, and gender. Understanding the origin of values, attitudes, norms, and behaviors helps individuals in adapting to new environments.

The second focus of pre-experience preparation is developing participants' understanding of the program environment. It is important to clearly specify program goals, objectives, and expectations of group members. This entails a gradual introduction of the new environment through informational mailings, open communication with participants, and pre-experience orientations. Information can cover logistics of the experiences, cultural norms and expectations of the program, and possible programmatic variations a participant may encounter.

Understanding environmental norms of the outdoor program before arrival allows for positive and smooth transition. The goal is to provide participants with a realistic sense of control and understanding during the transition, by providing information allowing them to make objective comparisons between the physical setting and cultural norms of the program and those of their home environment. A sound understanding of influencing factors enables one to identify, analyze the origin of and accept differences, and chart a different course of action to avoid cultural conflict. Having access to program information prior to the experience provides a means of anticipating potential cultural conflicts and being pro-active when interacting with others.

Bear Hill Camp experienced a substantial decrease in early camper departures after implementing a pre-camp communication program. Previous statements by departing campers regarding their surprise at the rustic nature of the camp resulted in a revision of pre-experience preparation procedures. Information regarding living conditions, daily activities, previous camper experiences, and program objectives and expectations were made available during camper recruitment and continuously communicated until the campers' arrival. Campers were allowed to meet staff members and tour the camp prior to attendance and written material by staff members and former campers provided various perspectives on the Bear Hill experience. These measures resulted in appropriate matching of participant expectations and program objectives and relieved some of the anxiety common when entering a new living environment.

### **Support structures during the experience**

During the experience much can be done to facilitate cultural adaptation and this remains perhaps the most fruitful area for future exploration. Support structures could include, but are not limited to the creation of a caring group atmosphere (Brownlee & Yerkes, 2003; Mitten, 1995), group contracts (Medrick, 1977; Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988; Schoel &

Maizell, 2002), get-to-know-one-another activities (Neill, 2004b), peer-to-peer regard and conflict resolution skills (Kreidler & Furlong, 1995), positive leader regard for students (Mitten, 1995; Russell, 2000), leader personality (especially warmth and trustability, e.g., see Hendy, 1975; Richards, 1977), student involvement in leadership decisions (Greenaway, 2004), and emotional expression and processing activities (Coleman, 1997).

It is important for participants to be assisted in the cross-cultural experience by a network of supporters and support processes. This network can include mentors or leaders, fellow participants, and supportive members from the home environment, as well as new opportunities, such as relations with nature (Neill & Heubeck, 1997). Whilst support alone may be beneficial, a recent study suggested the combination of challenge and support in adventure education was particularly potent for developing psychological resilience (Neill & Dias, 2001). Lack of sufficient support structures can lead to cultural adaptation problems and outdoor programs which don't achieve their objectives (e.g., see Purdie & Neill, 1999; Rickinson, et al., 2004).

As a group progresses through the storming stage with individuals potentially reaching the crisis stage of adaptation, group processing should be considered for use on a routine basis. This allows for open discussion of cultural incidents and exploration of individual behaviors. However, in situations where group discussions are ineffective, alternative strategies such as non-direct intervention methods are recommended (Handley, 1997). To emphasize cultural adaptation, discussions can focus on differences between the program and home cultures, individual and group obstacles to adaptation, and clarification of cultural misinterpretations. It is important for guided discussions to avoid negative processing, such as condemnation of specific cultures, personalities and viewpoints. Facilitation techniques including front-loading, framing and debriefing (Priest & Gass, 1997; Luckner & Nadler, 1997) can be used to focus on cultural adaptation. In addition, activities specifically focusing on cultural awareness and cross-cultural skills are becoming more common in outdoor and experiential education (e.g., Kreidler & Furlong, 1995; Neill, 2004a).

Group discussions also provide an opportunity to monitor group development and individual progress through the stages of adaptation. Educators can encourage participants to identify personal coping and adaptation processes and explore how these responses might be used in other experiences. Participants can be asked to identify their own stages of adaptation (whether they fit theoretical models or not) and be provided with opportunities to explore the narrative of their personal adjustment process (Carter, 1992;

Cassidy, 2001). Understanding the journey of one's personal adaptation can be supported through the use of creative methods for personal exploration and group discussion (e.g., Greenaway, 2003), as well as the myriad of informal opportunities presenting themselves in any outdoor program (Orford, 1993).

### **Post-experience debriefing**

The ability to effectively process a cultural incident is a life skill that can be transferred to future interpersonal interactions in new environments. Transfer of learning is important in all educational environments including outdoor programs. Case histories of participants in wilderness adventure courses strongly suggest that without effective follow-up programs, initial gains in learning are short-lived (Durgin & McEwen, 1991), and may lead to adjustment problems (Allison, 2000), although empirical evidence is more promising (Hattie, et al, 1997). Life skills and knowledge gained in outdoor programs become inconsequential if they can not be transferred from the outdoor setting to a learner's home environment (Gass, 1999).

In an ideal outdoor program, participants develop independent skills and the group reaches its program goals and objectives. Towards the end of a program participants increasingly engage in cultural transitioning back to their home environments. To the extent that home and program environments differ, the learner may experience difficulties translating outdoor program experiences to past and future experiences. During this fourth stage of cultural adaptation, participants can be given opportunities to identify lessons learned, obstacles overcome, and progress made and encouraged to explore ways of transferring relevant skills and knowledge to other situations.

If the focus has been on adaptation skills learned during an outdoor program, these may be readily applied to other life experiences such as entering a new school, moving away from home, getting married, or changing jobs. A young boy was facing a family move after leaving Bear Hill Camp one summer. On his camper comments card he wrote; "I learned I can make friends wherever I go. I am not as afraid to move as I was before coming to camp." Thus, preparing to transfer such skills can be an on-going process through an entire outdoor experience.

It is important to help students re-enter their home environments by providing discussions around expectations of family and friends, differences of the two environments, and possible reverse culture shock. Reverse culture shock occurs when participants re-enter their home environment and find difficulty processing the novel experience and accepting the 'normalcy' of home. Reverse culture shock, or "post-expedition syndrome," resulting from outdoor trips is a

well-known phenomenon amongst outdoor recreators and outdoor instructors, but it is yet to attract much theoretical or research interest.

Assistance in re-entering the home environment can be provided, if needed, through continued contact with other participants and program facilitators. Group discussions could be facilitated through reunions, internet chats, and phone calls. Keeping past participants involved through information mailings allows for continued connection with the program. Learning does not necessarily end on the last day of a program. The program experience may follow participants (for better or worse) throughout their lives.

### **Conclusion**

This article has depicted outdoor programs as cross-cultural experiences. In so doing, the article challenges some common ways of viewing cross-cultural and outdoor experiences. The first tendency is to view culture shock negatively. It is less well known that mild and/or well-supported experiences of culture shock are potentially beneficial (Furnham, 2003). Outdoor programming is generally conducted in a dramatically different culture but also within a supportive social and pedagogical framework. Thus, outdoor programming may provide an ideal situation for safe, positive experiences of culture shock and development of cultural adaptation skills.

The second tendency in cross-cultural theory and research challenged by this paper is that culture is necessarily associated with race, ethnicity and nationality. We have barely mentioned these terms because contemporary understanding of culture is more fluid than traditional understandings (Furnham, 2003; Sperring, 2001). In a sense, "we are all migrants: even if we stay in the country of our birth" (Carter, 1992, inside front cover), because we are all dealing with changing life circumstances. By explaining outdoor programs as a cross-cultural experience we have sought to bring cross-cultural and outdoor literature closer together in a positive, practical way.

This paper has also challenged the tendency in outdoor education to view outdoor programs as having uniformly positive effects on participants. Instead we encourage an individual differences point of view, in which participant reactions to outdoor programs may vary widely. We have also argued that the individual experience of cross-cultural adaptation in outdoor programs is interwoven with the stages of group development.

In essence, we propose that outdoor programs can be understood as providing supported opportunities for exploring one's cultural self and developing cross-cultural adaptation skills. The dynamic

nature of outdoor programs requires participants to accommodate actively to new environments, physical and social demands, and feedback and insights into one's behaviors (Richards, 1977). Typical problems experienced by outdoor program participants can be understood as experiences of cultural crisis or culture shock. Successful adaptation to an outdoor program requires an acceptance of living situations, an understanding of new behavioral norms and expectations, the acquisition of camping and activity skills, and development of a meaningful and respected role in the group.

Based on cross-cultural literature, successful adaptation is more likely to occur when there is adequate preparation for the new environment, understanding of the new cultural norms, and an appreciation of typical stages of cultural adaptation. By proactively addressing such aspects of cross-cultural experience, outdoor programs can better facilitate participants' development of cultural adjustment skills. However, if participants are not sufficiently supported, especially during experiences of cultural crisis, this can impact negatively on both the potential for personal growth and the development of both individual and group

Successful integration into new social situations is difficult to achieve and may require significant reevaluation of personal norms, values, and behaviors as these are compared with the demands of the new environment. Cross-cultural adaptation involves developing skills, which are applicable to many aspects of a person's life. Pederson (1995) found adaptation skills transferable to "any situation where an individual is forced into an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies" (p. 1). Thus, we suggest participants who successfully adapt to outdoor programs may be aided in their capacity to navigate future cross-cultural territory.

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## About the authors

*Sheila Fabrizio has a Masters degree in outdoor education from the University of New Hampshire, USA, was a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal (1995-1997) and worked as the 4-H Camps Manager in New Hampshire, USA (1998-2002). Currently, Sheila works winters as the Children's Center Manager at Loon Mountain Ski Area in Lincoln, NH and manages her family's apple orchard (Windy Ridge Orchard and Christmas Tree Farm) during the rest of the year. Email: sheila\_fab@yahoo.com*

*James Neill works as a lecturer in the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Canberra and runs the <<http://www.wilderdom.com>>www.wilderdom.com website. Previously he taught outdoor education at the University of New Hampshire (2001-2003). He has also worked an instructor for Outward Bound Australia and as an outdoor education research consultant. Email james@wilderdom.com*