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## CULTURE SHOCK AS A SOCIAL ISSUES

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to investigate various forms of culture shock experienced by people who visit a foreign country for the first time. The study further documented various forms of culture shock such as communication, dress, religion, food, and language etc., and also proposed mechanisms to handle it. The data were collected from 110 respondents through a series of semi-structured interviews with Omani nationals and expatriates currently working in the Sultanate of Oman. The respondents were selected from a wide variety of demographic, socioeconomic and organizational backgrounds to reflect the true multinational workforce structure in Oman. The interviews were conducted by adopting a three-step process. One of the major findings of this research study is that both Omanis and expatriates who travel abroad encountered cultural shock. The study also concluded that most respondents were affected (culture shock) by religious and traditional issues, whereas factors such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, rules and weather patterns did not affect them much. This study also documented fourteen different categories of culture shock that can be experienced by people while visiting foreign cultures.

**Keywords:** culture shock, expatriates, Omanis, religion, cross cultural management

1. Introduction Our fragmented world is progressively replaced by a new border less environment with the support of global organizations, mass education, IT and low cost transportations. As a result people are moving more easily and more frequently around the world for traveling, studying, working and so forth. Such recent factors make the planet both smaller and cosmopolitan. According to Chen et al., (2011) people are increasingly working in a diverse cultural environment where both organizations and individuals are facing the challenges of cultural diversity in a global world. For Tyler (1871), culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities by man as a member of a society. Hofstede (1980), defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another”. In fact, since the 1960s many studies have provided more specific and thorough theories, concepts and frameworks in the field of culture shock and the research areas seem unlimited. Scholars focus on social value patterns, being versus doing culture, analytic vs. holistic thinking, hierarchical vs. equalitarian, individualism vs. collectivism, conflict resolution, stress, intellectual and orientation modes with the study of time, space, verbal & nonverbal communication, proxemics, haptics and so on (Hall, 1961; Longstreet, 1978; Gardner 1983; Lane, 2002; Gilton, 2007).

1.1 Culture Shock Kohls (1979) defined culture shock as “the term used for the pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation that is experienced in varying degrees when spending an extended period of time in a new environment”. One of the challenges faced by expatriates going abroad for the first time is the peril of being not adequately informed of the host country’s culture. Expatriates who are ill-informed about the practices of another culture are likely to fail in their assignments because they fail to appreciate how differences in culture affect the practice of international business. In general, culture shock refers to the anxiety or stress that is caused by being in a new and foreign environment and the absence of the familiar signs and symbols of the home country. Culture shock may also result because of a person's ethnocentric attitude. Ethnocentrism is a belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group or

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culture. Together with ethnocentrism, disregard or contempt for the new culture experienced also can result in culture shock. With regard to the specific consequences of culture shock in the workplace, a survey conducted by Windham International, NFTC, & SHRM in 1999 identified three leading causes of what they called “assignment failure”: partner dissatisfaction, family concerns, and the inability to adapt. All three causes, particularly the inability to adapt, suggest that successfully crossing cultures is the major challenge for expatriates. The costs of cross-cultural failure for both individuals and their organizations are financial, professional and emotional including one’s self-esteem and at times one’s marriage and family (Storti, 2007). While Feichtinger and Fink (1998) concluded that culture shock is a both psychological and physical reaction of a person staying abroad, Adler (2003), found that if culture shock is not handled properly, it would prolong for a long period of time. On a similar note, Smith (2008) also found that culture shock is one of the biggest barriers to international travel. The need for understanding cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication is becoming a global issue (Xia, 2009). Since the 80s, culture shock has gained recognition as an important issue in cross-cultural studies and practice and has been incorporated into pre-departure training programs both of expatriate executives and their families (Murdoch & Kaciak, 2011). In fact, there is an increasing need for more cross-cultural management research as business is becoming global and very little research has been carried out on this topic in South America, Africa and the Middle East (Burke, 2010). Accordingly, the purpose of our research is to categorize and to explain the multifaceted reality of culture shock expressed / experienced by people who face it in a global world. The first section of our study involves a focused review on culture shock with regard to psychology and performance. Next, we present our research method followed by our findings and discussion. Finally we close our study with a conclusion and suggestions for further research.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Culture Shock and Psychology

The analysis of the very early literature on culture shock demonstrates a focus on the listing of unpleasant international experiences, for instance cultural misunderstanding presented by the anthropologist Oberg who first gave the name of culture shock in a seminar addressed to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro on August 3, 1954. Oberg referred to the symptom as an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad. He defined the symptoms of culture shock as "a feeling of helplessness and fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations". Additionally Oberg contributed to this field by defining culture shock such as losing the guidance of the familiar social cues; finding oneself in a sea of incomprehensible contextual signs; rejection of the host country and glorification of the home country which he labeled "regression" (Murdoch & Kaciak, 2011; Oberg, 1960). Further, Oberg argues that individuals who experience a foreign culture will face distinct phases. More precisely Oberg named the first stage xenophilia as the visitor romanticizes the novel culture; however in phase two, he will experience xenophobia and that is precisely the culture shock whereby the individual reacts and develops a negative attitude to the host culture (Dutton, 2011; Oberg, 1960). Junor and Usher (2008) also concurred that culture shock prevents students from going abroad for further studies. Loh (2000) proposed that culture shock even contributes to aggressiveness in people and can also make them act violently sometimes. As a kind of emotional response to stress, culture shock is also examined with regard to individual psychology. Researchers define culture shock as the psychological disorientation experienced by an individual who suddenly enters radically different cultural environments to live and work (Oberg, 1960; Eschbach et al, 2001). Culture shock is seen as uncertainty that causes people to suffer anxiety, depression and isolation (Winkelman, 1994). Culture shock is defined as the uncertainty that a person feels when facing an unknown culture (Taff, 1977; Chen et al., 2011). Moreover, it is a common psychological response to an unfamiliar culture which in extreme cases may be characterized by depressed or paranoid behavior (Hunter & Whitten, 1976). Other

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studies show many factors influence culture shock such as individual personality characteristics, demographic factors and organizational support. Personality traits such as cultural flexibility, ethnocentricity, stress reactions, interpersonal and relational skills are most likely to affect the individual (Sims & Schraederm, 2004). In addition, French (2010) argues that culture is more than the sum of individual members' attitudes. He depicted a more complex model of culture with a range of institutional factors he labels society-wide factors.

**2.2 Culture and Work-Related Stress** Work-related stress is a pattern of physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions to some extremely taxing aspects of work content, work organization and work environment. When people experience work-related stress, they often feel tense, distressed, and cannot cope. Due to globalization and changes in the nature of work, people in developing countries have to deal with increasing work-related stress. In industrialized countries, people are becoming more familiar with work-related stress and developed mechanisms to manage it. Cultural aspects may need some attention when dealing with work-related stress in developing countries. For example, spirituality, religion, and community rituals are often more important than acquisition of material possessions or money. In Latin America, for example, work-related stress is at present already acknowledged as one of the big epidemics of modern working life; some specific cross-sectional data show the importance of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease in the population in Mexico, Brazil and Colombia" (World Health Organization, 2012). In fact, stress is part of life and people of all ages, genders, and educational backgrounds as well as those from private or public sector experience stress. The impact of stress can be physical, emotional, mental, and behavioral. Stress can be all those feelings and perceptions of lack of time, ability, skill, or resources to effectively deal with personal or professional demands in a given time. To manage stress better, one must know his/her optimal load at work (Nguyen & Mujtaba, 2011). Work Culture is defined as the attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organization. It is the specific collection of values and norms shared by people in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with external stakeholders. Moreover organizational culture influences various aspects of people working within them. They may include the management styles, decision making processes and various psychological processes. Stress is one of the important consequences resulting from organizational culture. Job stress is a chronic disease caused by conditions in the work place that negatively affect an individual's performance and overall well-being of his body and mind. For instance, in India the daily hassles in the workplace emerged as the single stress determinant of physical and psychological well-being for the physician group; factors such as lack of control, physical environment, frustration and work organization are also prominent. However, several other aspects also have a major impact in this regard such as lack of work-life balance, lack of support and difficult relationships (Suri & Arora, 2009). As a result, stress not only impacts individuals but also organizational performance. In high stress environments, employees tend to have more defensive behaviors such as engaging in minimal communication, expressing hard feelings and mistrust among others, isolating themselves from the group, and maintaining uncooperative relationships. In a low stress environment, people tend to possess more collaborative behaviors, which create a more cooperative relationship and trust among others (Oaklander & Fleishman, 1964). Today's work stressors have included workload, work-life conflict, increasing work intensity, leadership styles, workplace conflict, organizational downsizing and restructuring, and organizational mergers; outcomes have typically considered job satisfaction, commitment, psychological health, work-family balance, and withdrawal behaviors (Burke, 2010). Even leaders tend to face ethical dilemmas when dealing with stressful situations (Mohr & Wolfram, 2010; Mujtaba & Sims, 2011). External threats from competitors, role ambiguity, role conflict, overload, interpersonal problems, stressful and demanding work schedules, family and

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economic difficulties, are among a few examples of stressors that can put leaders deep into stress which can influence their ethical decision making. However, the way people handle stress might be different from many other cultures. For instance Vietnamese people tend to hold stress and emotional problems to themselves or within the extended families but they usually regard stress as a sign of weakness and immaturity. Consequently, they find different ways to deal with it by going to prayer sessions, spending time with friends or family, gambling, drinking, and smoking (Nguyen & Mujtaba, 2011).

### 2.3 Culture Shock and Expatriates

In his model, Graig (1979) argues that people display two main types of symptoms: 1) physical ones, such as absent-mindedness, a faraway look and excessive fears; and 2) psychological ones, such as unreasonable anger, a feeling of dependence and helplessness, and an excessive fear of food, water, and hygiene. In the second stage of his model the individual exhibits three different reactions the author labels as flight-fight, cultural empathy, and going native (falling in love with the local culture). In the third step, expatriates are classified into three different categories: The encapsulators, because they choose to live in a closed bubble with people from their own culture; the cosmopolitans, as they fine-tune to both cultures; and the absconders, who avoid contact with their own culture and definitely adjust to local people. Other researchers describe culture shock after a period of time which varies from one individual to another. They explain that people will gradually realize and distinguish behaviors that are acceptable in their home country and rejected in the host country; and people understand that some behaviors are viewed as offensive in their home country but may be acceptable in the host country (Black & Gregersen, 1991). Understanding the difference between onetime occurrence of culture shock and the ones experienced by the expatriates which normally takes months or even years to get accustomed to the new environment is important. As such, when a tourist encounters a cultural shock, after all it is not going to affect the productivity. However, in case of an expatriate, many things are at stake such as loss of productivity, emotional stress, and failure of assignment, if the expatriate fails to come out of the cultural shock soon enough and start adjusting to the new environment. Gabel et al., (2005) investigated how Emotional Intelligence (EI) plays an important role in shaping an expatriate's experience during foreign assignments. The authors concluded that if expatriates have higher Emotional Intelligence scores, then the probability of them being successful in a foreign assignment is very high. Similarly, in a study involving Korean students, Moon (2010) found that Cultural Intelligence (CQ) positively correlated with self-competence (self-awareness and relationship management). So, this study reinforces the point that one of the major contributors of success in a foreign assignment is self-competence of an expatriate. When classifying individuals, Gilton (2007) argues that three groups of people may face culture shock: (1) those outside their own countries; (2) those experiencing a very different culture within their own countries; and (3) former expatriates who are returning home. Within the workplace, culture shock causes people a certain amount of psychological stress and uncertainty, resulting in inappropriate behavior and attitude that can influence job satisfaction and performance. In fact, when expatriates are confused in their roles, job expectations, values, feelings, or self-identity, culture shock may occur (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock is a normal process of adjustment that affects the performance of expatriates. It is one of the predictors or antecedents of foreign workers' performance (Guy & Patton, 1996). Other researchers claim that knowledge about cultural values is a factor that decreases culture shock. As a result, knowledge, skills, abilities and motivation are reliable predictors of job performance in organizations (Winkelman, 1994; Campbell, 1999). Ng et al., (2003) define corporate culture as the business life pillar. More specifically, the scholars refer to a group of ruling ideas that includes ways of reasoning and acting, common shared values, codes of behavior and ethical standards. These ruling ideas are formed and developed over a long period with the active consensus of leaders; in addition the



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whole is influenced by the social environment as a background. Adjusting to a new culture can be a challenging and stressful experience (Mohammed & Chelliah, 2010). A study done in Poland by Murdoch and Kaciak (2011) revealed that a group of expatriate executives (86% from Anglo-Saxon origin tested on how they respond to Poland's cultural dimensions which are specified in accordance with Hofstede's indices) pointed out Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance as the most irritating features at workplace. Power Distance - which can also be perceived as a possible legacy from communism - may have an exceptional, comprehensive and profound influence in Poland, in all areas from management to client service.

### Conclusion

This research study reinforces the theme that understanding the influence of national culture is critical to the effectiveness of business executives' foreign assignments. Though, culture shock experienced by travelers and business executives in a foreign country is a well-researched topic in western countries, this is the first such study in the Sultanate of Oman. Since culture shock affects the performance of expatriates in the workplace, as this study demonstrates, executives should be ready to face challenges with their religious practices and their tradition. The findings of this study also demonstrate that unfamiliarity with a host country's culture is a primary reason for a culture shock. So, managers who are assigned to take up foreign assignments must be sufficiently trained on host country's cultural practices. People are moving and working around the world and that increasing phenomenon makes them face the challenges of cultural shock. Culture shock is seen as uncertainties that cause anxiety, depression and isolation when people are faced with an unknown culture. As discussed earlier, many factors influence culture shock such as the cultural flexibility, ethnocentricity and stress reactions of the expatriates. When examining the main categories of culture shock, our study revealed that culture shock is mainly rooted in religion and traditions as people often equate something different with something wrong. Actually unfamiliarity makes people unable to understand the ideology of another and how they should behave with them. The real issue is that such unfamiliar circumstances require adaptation which is a lengthy and difficult process.

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