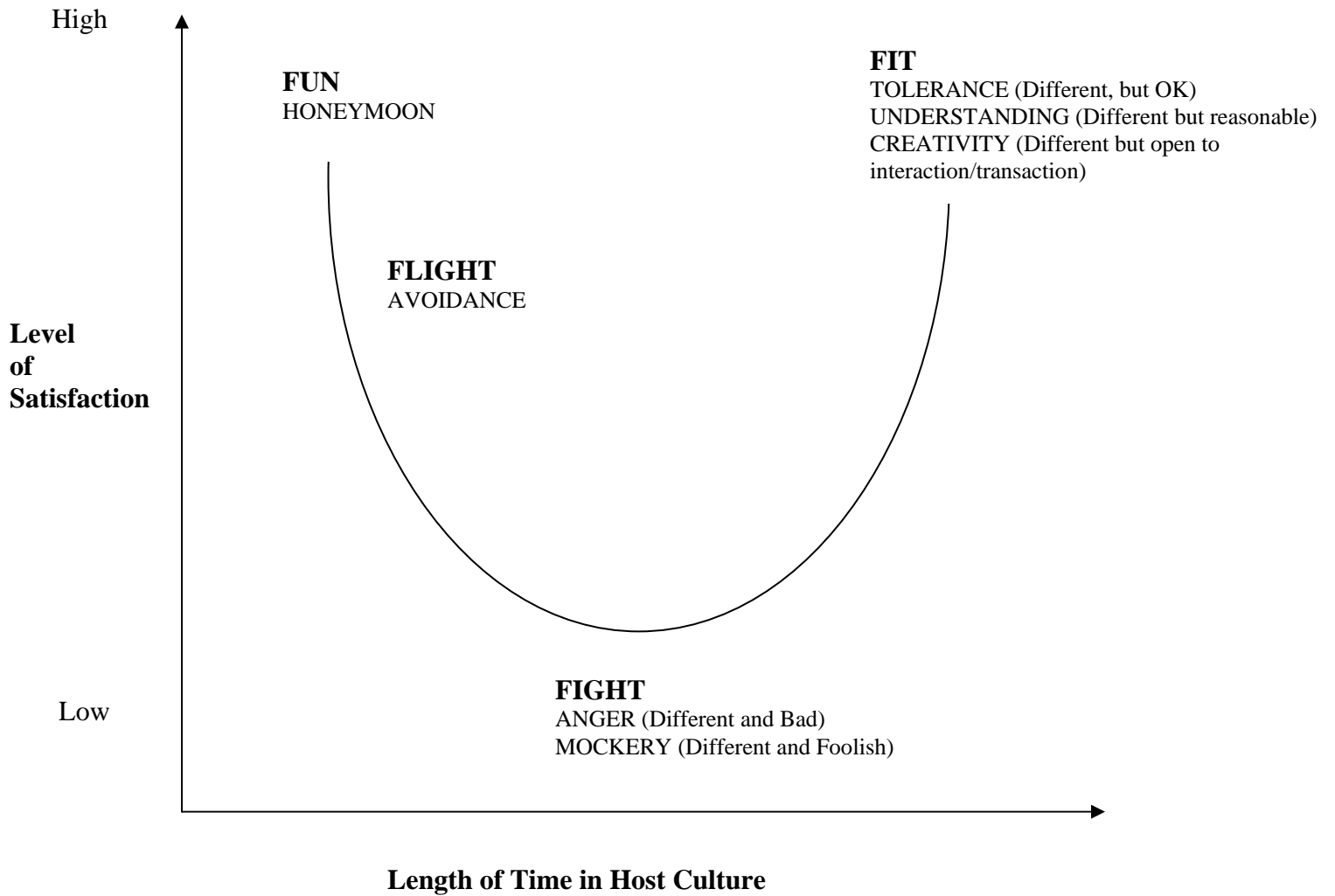


# Stages of Transition

## The U-Curve



## **An Introduction to International Students Experiencing Cultural Transition**

Adapted from a teaching by Lisa Espineli Chinn of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship

Every person has a point of reference or a “mental map” he calls his culture. This mental map is an integrated set of beliefs, ideas and products that shape the way we live, evaluate life, and interpret the lives of others around us.

When students’ mental maps meet the American mental map, they find themselves in a state of confusion, frustration and self-discovery. Those that have studied cross-cultural travelers have identified certain stages that travelers go through. This cross-cultural path is known as the “U-Curve.”

### **The U-Curve**

Transition may bring a series of ups and downs. There may be two or more high and low points a student may experience. This model shows only a segment of what one feels when entering a new culture. The feelings spread themselves out for those who are staying for a longer period of time and contracts for the short-termer.

Multiple and simultaneous “U curves” may be experienced in transition. Adjustment in academic work may look different from social or emotional involvement.

### **The Fun Stage: Different is Great and Wonderful**

New students generally go through this stage of wide-eyed excitement where everything is new, pleasant and nice. It may be the simple and efficient way that systems work, the clean surroundings or the quality of professors and research facilities in the US.

Or it may just be the simple freedom that makes the transition to the US a wonderful experience. Or it may be the joy of being themselves with no parents to watch and control their lives and no social structures to answer to (even temporarily). Or this stage is fun because of the wonderful people who impress them with their informality and generosity. Aside from the modern gadgets of life they may also appreciate the abundant and inexpensive foods available to them (even if they are bland to their spicy tastebuds.)

This stage is full of the new and the wonderful.

### **Flight Stage: Different and Unpleasant**

A new feeling sets in at this stage. The wear and tear of cross-cultural living is showing its toll. What used to fascinate may no longer invite the initial response of wonderment. Instead they may find themselves confused and dissatisfied, alone and distant to their new world. They may find themselves avoiding contact with the American people or the American system.

The common phrase to describe this feeling is “culture shock.” It is the emotional response to the newness of the environment which is sometimes accompanied by physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness and even nausea.

The expected response of the traveler at this stage is that of avoidance. They may pull away from the stress by staying in their room, being by themselves, or just by staying with their own people.

They may also find themselves emotionally flying back home. Wishing they were back home is a nice thought to entertain at this stage. They are beginning to say to themselves and to others, "I do not like this place."

### **Fight Stage: Different and Bad; Different and Foolish**

At this stage things are not looking up. They may start to say, "I hate this place." They may find themselves at the bottom of the U-curve. The things they see and experience all point to the negative aspect of their journey to this country. During this period, they may discover that the people are not as nice as they thought they were, or they may feel misunderstood or embarrassed. Perhaps their English is not improving as fast as they want, or their professor may be insensitive to their needs, or they have not made any friend yet, and to top it all, winter has set in and they are lonely or even angry.

Their anger may be directed toward the system, the people or the culture. They will experience bouts of anger because what they have seen is different and they have concluded that these differences are also bad. Additionally, they may also be tempted to mock and make fun of the new culture and the way people do things.

But remember this is only a stage, hopefully a temporary state of mind and feelings.

### **Fit Stage: Different but OK; Different but reasonable; Different but Open to Interaction/Transaction**

This is the hopeful stage. With time, patience, perseverance and the help of new friends, they will find themselves feeling better about their new environment and about themselves.

They will find themselves more tolerant of the many new things around them. It does not mean they approve of those things, but it means they are able to accept them as part of the new culture. They will also begin to discover the big picture of the new culture and the reason Americans do what they do. As they see our values, attitudes, and behavior in the context of the culture, they are able to understand more and criticize less. In addition, they will also find themselves more open and ready to new ideas and ways of doing things. As they engage in the life on campus and the community, their confidence in living, interacting and contributing to their new culture increases.

How long might this whole process take? A psychologist who has studied and seen cross-cultural travelers has said that it can take from 6 months to a year.

### **Three Responses**

The student's response to the challenge of cultural living will vary as imitation, isolation and integration. They will need to imitate the ways of the new culture in order to enter

our world. This **imitation** does not mean embracing everything about the new culture. It is more of a selective imitation where they copy at the level that is comfortable to them. They will also imitate and follow the generally accepted procedure and behavior in their new social circles. As they learn through following the local people, they begin to understand and appreciate the actual cultural behaviors and the meaning behind them.

**Isolation** is another response where a student may pull away (physically and emotionally) from cross-cultural encounters. They may distance themselves from events that call for heavy interaction with the nationals or a greater cultural leap on their part (e.g. shopping or talking on the phone.) As they are pulling away from such encounters, they will find comfort in being with their own people, speaking their own language or eating their common food. Isolation is healthy to keep their cultural and emotional balance, but it becomes unproductive when it keeps them from learning from their cross-cultural experience. Unguarded isolation can also lead to intense loneliness and even depression.

**Integration** is mixing with the culture. The student feels safe and comfortable in their new world. Their confidence leads them to contribute to their new culture through participation in events, sharing of ideas in discussions, and even cooking their favorite foods for others.

Over time, they may feel more secure about who they are and their place in their new culture. They may still feel like an outsider and yet know that they have the respect and trust of their hosts and new friends. There will be cultural tensions along the way, but they are on the road to being a bi-cultural person, with the accompanying ease of moving in and out of their new world and their own cultural world.

Remember that learning a new culture takes time. The following things are key for helping students who are learning a new culture:

1. They need to understand that they are in transition. Encourage them to be easy on themselves and understand that what they are experiencing is very common and natural.
2. Be a friend who can explain to them the way the American culture works.
3. Remember their transition is many-layered: academic, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, political and financial. Some areas of transition may be easier than others.
4. Encourage them to enjoy their journey with a good sense of humor and a great sense of learning and adventure.