

# Culture Shock in a Global World: Factors Affecting Culture Shock Experienced by Expatriates in Oman and Omani Expatriates Abroad

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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 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 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* (see Figure 2).

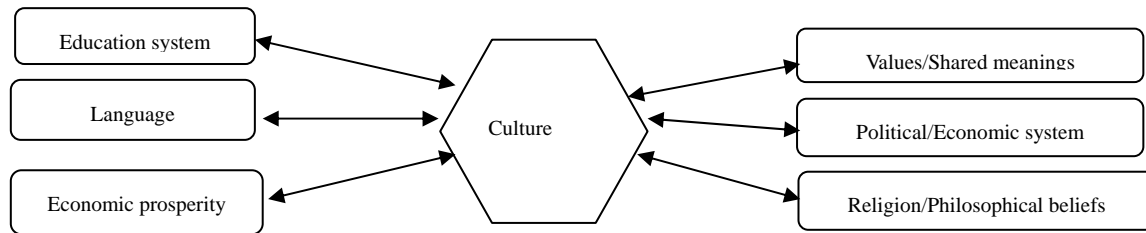


Figure 1. Society-wide factors contributing to a multifaceted model of culture

Source: French, 2010. Cross cultural management in work organizations.

## 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. However, in developing countries, this may not yet be the case. The stress process can be summarized in a model (Figure 3):

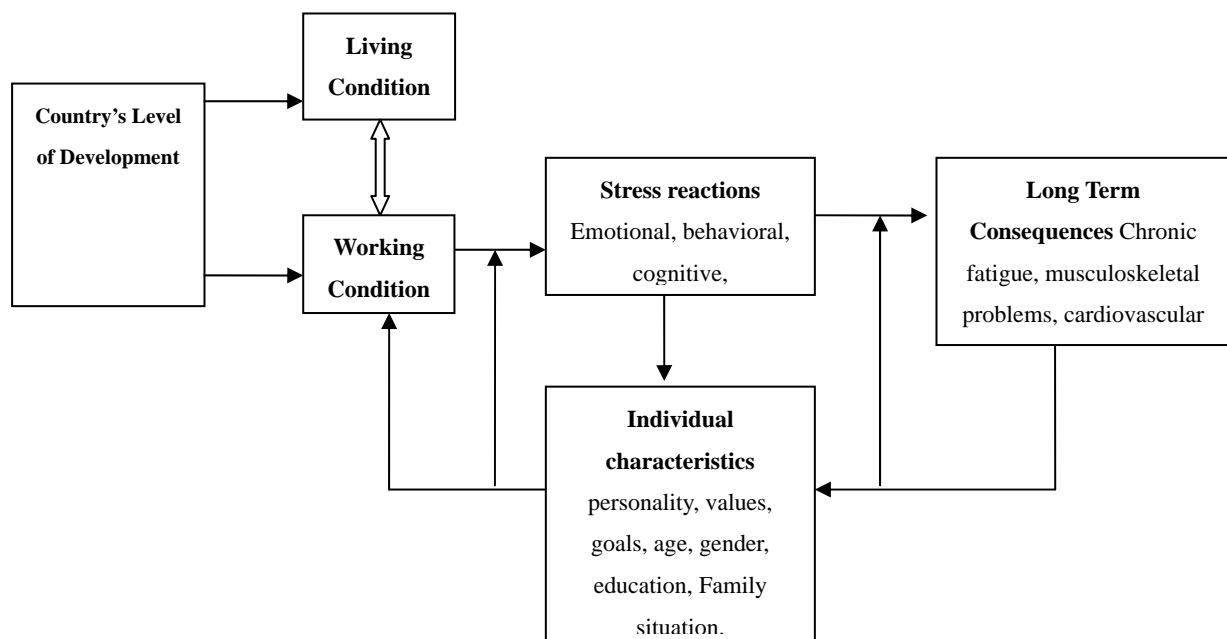


Figure 2. Contextualized model on causes and consequences of work-related stress

Source: World Health Organization (2012).

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 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). According to Mitchell and Myles (2010), Culture shock could be a onetime event or a time bound process (see Figure 3).

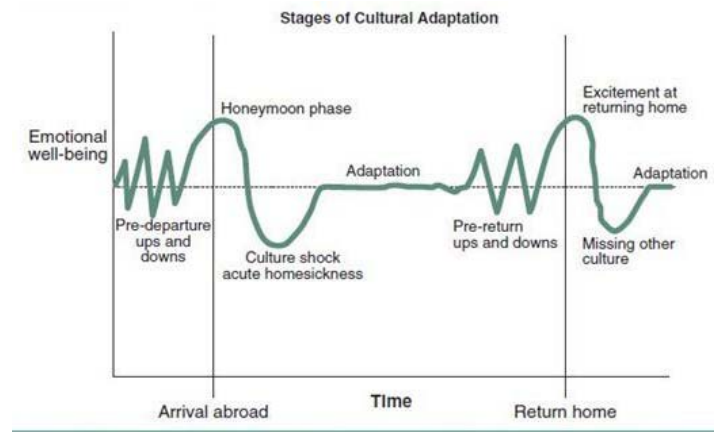


Figure 3. Stages of cultural adaptation

Source: Lynne Mitchell and Wayne Myles, University of Guelph, 2010).

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 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.

### 3. Methodology

Dowling and Welch (2004) asserted that the study of culture shock is surprisingly under analyzed. The main objective of this study was to examine the experience of cultural shock from both Omani and expatriate respondents when they visit foreign countries. Citizens of Oman and expatriates living in Oman were selected

for participation in the study. The respondents were selected from a wide variety of demographic, socioeconomic and organizational backgrounds to reflect the true multinational workforce structure in Oman. Also, an attempt was made to have a broad distribution across the demographic categories of gender, age, and education. Oman is a home to more than a million expatriate workforce. Similarly, globalization and increased opportunities for Omanis to get educated abroad and medical tourism have encouraged Omanis to travel in large numbers abroad. This phenomenon made these two groups of respondents an ideal focal point to investigate the influence of culture shock.

The research methodology for this paper was based on a series of semi-structured interviews with Omani nationals and expatriates currently working in the Sultanate of Oman. During the initial interview, they were asked if they have visited a foreign country. If they answered in the negative, then they were not chosen as respondents. However, if they answered in the affirmative, their consent was sought to participate in the research study. After the participants agreed to participate in the study, they were further questioned about whether they had encountered culture shock in one form or another as exhibited in Tables 1 to 14. If the answer was in the negative, they were then dropped from the sample pool. Those who answered in the affirmative were selected to be respondents for this research study. They were then asked to share their experiences of culture shock.

The interviews were conducted for a period of 4 months from June to September 2012. This methodology allowed the interviewees to recollect and reflect upon the incidents of culture shock as some of the incidents had occurred many years previously. Some of the respondents did not know what a culture shock is. As a result, the interviewers had to explain the term culture shock succinctly in English to respondents who understood English and in Arabic to respondents who wanted it to be explained in Arabic. In total, 150 respondents were approached to participate in this research study. However, after initial enthusiasm, twenty respondents failed to return to our subsequent interviews and twenty responses were so vague the incidents of culture shock could not meaningfully be deciphered. That left the study with 110 valid responses which resulted in a 73% response rate.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

#### Culture shock by category

Respondents to our study originate from various countries around the world. They were all personally affected by culture shock phenomenon in a wide range of host countries. After assessing the accuracy and reliability of the 110 respondents, we have selected one main event for each respondent. From that sample, the distribution by gender was balanced and shows an extensive range of respondents from 18 to 70 years old. On the whole, the number of events cited by respondents was sufficiently discriminatory to move to the next step. Based on the 110 fully documented main events clearly stated during the interviews, we have built 14 different categories of culture shock that are summarized in separate tables as follows: communication, dress, ethics, individualism/collectivism, food, language, structure, perception, power distance, religion, rules, time orientation, traditions and weather (see table 1 to 14):

Table 1. Culture shock and communication

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	USA	Oman	41	M	Men kissing each other and touching each other nose to nose.
2	Russia	China	29	F	Language misunderstandings.
3	Oman	Japan	47	M	Joining hands instead of shaking hands.
4	Malaysia	Turkey	25	M	Men hugging and kissing each other.
5	France	Portugal	52	M	The Portuguese doing the T shape with their hands as a sign to wait instead of asking someone to wait.
6	Sweden	Thailand	32	M	Not friendly and no facial expressions.
7	Sri Lanka	China	39	M	Indirect eye contact when speaking and greeting.
8	South Africa	Japan	43	F	The importance of wide personal space.
9	USA	Oman	21	F	Men kissing each other and touching each other nose to nose.
10	Canada	Oman	28	M	Daughter's friends never establishing eye contact.

Table 2. Culture shock and dress

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	USA	43	M	Nobody caring about a naked man's presence in the station.
2	Germany	Oman	47	M	Men wearing white and women wearing black.

Table 3. Culture shock and ethics

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	Iran	35	M	Paying for 60 seats in an empty bus instead of 5 seats. And when 50 people enter later also asking them to pay.
2	Oman	Thailand	37	M	Renting broken cars then having to repair them.
3	Oman	Egypt	33	F	Travelers returning to their flat finding the door closed because it was not actually rented to the owner.

Table 4. Culture shock and individualism/collectivism

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	Canada	31	M	No one greeting a new comer and preferring to watch TV.
2	Kuwait	UK	50	M	British father passed away and the family arguing about who was going to pay for the funeral expenses.
3	Oman	UK	38	M	An old lady not being visited by her daughter who lived nearby.

Table 5. Culture shock and food

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	Japan	25	F	Only eating cornflakes because of being afraid of unknown food.
2	UK	Oman	47	M	Lunch being the main meal and being full of meat, rice and fattening food.
3	USA	Turkey	50	F	Eating fish together with yogurt may be poisonous.
4	Kuwait	Japan	35	F	Natto – fermented soy beans is loved by Japanese, but feared by foreigners.
5	Oman	Australia	22	F	Not refusing food when invited to visit a family.
6	Sudan	Qatar	60	M	Breakfast, lunch, and dinner all being rice.

Table 6. Culture shock and language

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Jordan	Japan	38	M	Calling a male professor as Sir followed by his first name.
2	Dubai	Germany	29	F	People rarely speaking English even if they know it.
3	Oman	USA	27	F	Being confused by people using the word "bathroom" instead of "toilet".
4	Philippines	Oman	46	F	Using her lips to express instead of talking
5	Oman	India	70	M	People asking him for money because they believe he is rich (as he speaks Arabic).

Table 7. Culture shock and structure (order &amp; organization)

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Egypt	Oman	50	M	The traffic being very organized and not crowded.
2	Oman	Egypt	27	M	Egyptian boss asking 'why you are changing your clothes every day? Because rich?'
3	Oman	Japan	45	M	The number of people in offices, classrooms and trains.
4	Japan	Turkey	40	M	Strange payment system for Dolmus (shared taxi or minibus in Turkey)
5	Oman	Saudi Arabia	39	F	The place being very dirty and the roads disorganized.

Table 8. Culture shock and perception

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	U.K.	39	M	Participants bringing their wives to conferences.
2	Oman	Europe	41	M	The leadership role played by women.
3	Egypt	USA	52	F	Being treated like a "walking bomb".
4	USA	Oman	37	M	The female students being open-minded and active.
5	French	USA	39	F	Thinking American people are very open-minded, but then being afraid of her head scarf and believing that she only stays at home.
6	India	USA	51	M	A policeman asking as a first question "what have you been drinking?"

Table 9. Culture shock and power distance

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Oman	UK	32	M	In the UK, the manager visiting his employees to assign them a task & even waiting to talk to them if they are busy on the phone.

Table 10. Culture shock and religion

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	India	USA	36	M	The amount of alcohol being used at a party.
2	Oman	Germany	28	M	Facing many challenges as a Muslim.
3	USA	Oman	34	M	Muslim women shaking hands.
4	Oman	UK	21	M	Being arrested because slaughtering a goat on the first day of Eid (a Muslim festival of thanksgiving).
5	UK	Oman	25	F	not being able to eat in public during the fasting for Ramadan.
6	Oman	India	55	M	Fasting in India means eating fruits and non-cooked and food.
7	Iraq	India	29	F	All vehicles stopping and people bending because of a cow passing in the street.
8	Oman	France	31	F	Wearing a scarf.
9	India	Oman	39	M	The slaughtering of cows.
10	Oman	Thailand	22	M	Prostitution being a normal job.
11	Oman	Australia	20	F	A dancer in the city square asking her to dance with him.
12	Oman	Australia	45	F	A male friend asking her for a hug.
13	Oman	UK	42	M	Neighbors calling the police to stop the slaughtering of a sheep.
14	Oman	Europe	48	M	Friends' daughter opening the door & wearing transparent clothes.



15	Oman	UK	51	M	UK friends checking if he is alive because he was fasting. Christian friends singing and dancing inside the church.
16	Oman	USA	30	M	People asking why Omanis do not eat pork, why women cover up and why only men marry four wives.
17	USA	Oman	43	M	Woman refusing to shake hands with her male Colleague.
18	Poland	Oman	35	F	Two girls asking her to wear a head scarf during Ramadan.
19	USA	Oman	18	F	Having a boyfriend not being acceptable.
20	USA	Oman	18	M	The shopkeeper being angry when asked for beers.
21	USA	Oman	18	M	Being told that smoking & drinking is forbidden but seeing Omanis smoking.

Table 11. Culture shock and rules

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	Syria	USA	27	M	Surprised at a restaurant's smokers section and the legal age for smoking (because free in Syria).
2	Syria	Korea	55	M	Young man throwing his cigarette butt in the lake and then being angry at getting a moral lesson from a Syrian.

Table 12. Culture shock and time orientation

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	USA	Oman	40	M	The weekend being Thursday and Friday.
2	India	Oman	42	M	A taxi driver stopping to wash himself, then praying and making the Indian late for a job interview.
3	UK	Oman	32	F	Guests arriving at 9 o'clock instead of the 8 o'clock written on the wedding card.
4	Palestine	Kenya	51	M	Students being an hour late and saying they were afraid to come half an hour late because too early.
5	Brazil	Oman	42	F	Arriving half an hour late for a meeting but people beginning without her.
6	Bangladesh	Oman	46	M	Students asking for the postponement of an assignment submission deadline.
8	India	Oman	51	F	A shop which is supposed to be opened at 4 p.m., but the shopkeepers coming at 5:15!

Table 13. Culture shock and traditions

Resp. #	Home Country	Host Country	Age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
1	USA	Oman	47	M	Politeness of Omani students.
2	Oman	Turkey	52	M	Being invited by a Turkish business man for dinner and the Turkish man spitting over the knife as a tradition.
3	Oman	Germany	39	M	After a sport class people going naked into the shower room.
4	USA	Oman	41	M	People eating from the same plate with their hands.
5	Oman	China	33	F	Being stopped by a Chinese women who thought she had lost her hair and asking her why.
6	Sri Lanka	Oman	34	M	Asking a man about directions but being invited to eat with the man's family.
7	Oman	Syria	41	M	A hotel employee not leaving the room because he was waiting for a tip.
8	India	Oman	35	F	A vegetarian invited by family refusing vegetables mixed with meats making the elders angry.
9	Germany	Oman	28	F	Limited communication between boys and girls.

10	Korea	Turkey	32	M	Hearing the call for prayer from loudspeaker and thinking that a war was occurring.
11	Oman	UK	41	M	A Korean roommate missing eating dog meat being surprised when the Omani asked him to eat cats.
12	South Africa	Scotland	38	F	The amount of alcohol being drunk by people.
13	USA	Oman	36	M	Eating with their hand and sitting on the ground.
14	Oman	Germany	31	M	Restaurant and shops all closed at 9:00 pm .
15	Oman	India	42	F	The continuous rain without any holidays. The bad smell and dirtiness outside clean houses.
16	Oman	Africa	39	M	Napping and relaxing during work being normal.
17	Oman	Germany	45	M	17th of July over 2 million couples going on a love march.
18	Sudan	Oman	38	F	Henna being on single girls because only married women put Henna in Sudan.
19	Oman	India	28	M	In India bride being responsible to pay dowry to the bridegroom.
20	USA	Greece	31	M	Nobody smiling back because seen as having a weak personality.
21	Oman	UK	37	F	Putting shoes over the shelf being seen by the British as bringing bad luck to the family.
22	USA	Oman	40	M	Omani women wearing black Abaya.
23	Oman	UK	29	F	People spending their free time reading books outside.
24	Jordan	Oman	45	M	Bullfighting in Oman.
25	UAE	Netherlands	25	M	Tomatoes festival where people hit each other by tomatoes. A big number of tomatoes being wasted.
26	New Zealand	Spain	65	M	Bulls' race in Spain.
27	USA	UAE	36	M	Sitting on the floor and eating from one plate.
28	India	USA	42	M	Getting a present from an American friend who then asked them to open it.
29	Egypt	Japan	45	M	People inside the restaurant clapping for him when he entered the restaurant
30	Lebanon	Belgium	41	F	In a restaurant with her family, her cell phone rang. Everybody looking at her because it is prohibited.
31	Canada	Oman	39	F	Omani women shopping with a list written by their housemaid.
32	Syria	Germany	28	M	Caring for a small dog that is their best friend.
33	Oman	USA	40	M	A friend living alone because his parents asked him to leave home.
34	UK	Egypt	65	M	The huge number of known people invited to the wedding.
35	UK	Oman	53	M	People wearing the traditional clothes (men wearing white flowing robes – <i>Dish Dasha</i> - and women wearing flowing robes in black- <i>Abaya</i> ).
36	Australia	Oman	46	M	Males and females not shaking hands.
37	India	Oman	39	F	A female student willing to buy <i>Abaya</i> clothes for an Indian

Table 14. Culture shock and weather

Resp. #	home country	host country	age	Gender	Summary of one main event experienced in the host country
1	Oman	Norway	42	F	People wearing thin clothing when the temperature was 10 degree Celsius.

When comparing each category of culture shock we observe that a huge number of respondents were concerned and affected by religion and tradition issues (see Table 10 and 13). Surprisingly few respondents were affected by rules, power distance, or individualism versus collectivism culture (see Table 9 and 11). Additionally, weather conditions were not an issue, even for people who originate from regions with contrasting temperatures and climates such as Africa or India vs. North America.

#### 4.2 Culture Shock by Nationality

The summary of our survey is also displayed according to the nationality of the respondents (See Table 15 & 16). The classification based on nationality of the respondents would help get a comparative approach of culture shock experienced by expatriates located in Oman and by Omanis living abroad as well.

Table 15. Expatriates living in Oman

Host Country	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
USA	Men kissing each other and touching each other nose to nose.
	The female students being open-minded and active.
	Muslim women shaking hands.
	Having a boyfriend not being acceptable.
	The shopkeeper being angry when asked for beers.
	Being told that smoking & drinking is forbidden but seeing Omanis smoking.
	Woman refusing to shake hands with her male Colleague.
	The weekend being Thursday and Friday.
	Politeness of Omani students.
	People eating from the same plate with their hands.
Canada	Eating with their hand and sitting on the ground.
	Omani women wearing black Abaya.
	Daughter's friends never establishing eye contact.
UK	Omani women shopping with a list written by their housemaid.
	Not being able to eat in public during the fasting for Ramadan.
Australia	Guests arriving at 9 o'clock instead of the 8 o'clock written on the wedding card.
	People wearing the traditional clothes (men wearing white flowing robes – <i>Dish Dasha</i> - and women wearing flowing robes in black- <i>Abaya</i> ).
Germany	Males and females not shaking hands.
	Men wearing white and women wearing black.
Poland	Limited communication between boys and girls.
	Two girls asking her to wear a head scarf during Ramadan.
Egypt	The traffic being very organized and not crowded.
Jordan	Bullfighting in Oman.
Sudan	Henna being on single girls because only married women put Henna in Sudan.
India	The slaughtering of cows.
	A taxi driver stopping to wash himself, then praying and making the Indian late for a job interview.
	A vegetarian invited by family refusing vegetables mixed with meats making the elders angry.
	A female student willing to buy <i>Abaya</i> clothes for an Indian woman.
	A shop which is supposed to be opened at 4 p.m., but the shopkeepers coming at 5:15!
Sri Lanka	Asking a man about directions but being invited to eat with the man's family.
Bangladesh	Students asking for the postponement of an assignment submission deadline.
Philippines	Using her lips to express instead of talking
Brazil	Arriving half an hour late for a meeting but people beginning without her.

Table 16. Omanis living abroad

Host Country	Summary of one main event experienced in the Host Country
	Nobody caring about a naked man's presence in the station.
	Being confused by people using the word "bathroom" instead of "toilet".
USA	Christian friends singing and dancing inside the church.
	People asking why Omanis do not eat pork, why women cover up and why only men marry four wives.
	A friend living alone because his parents asked him to leave home.
Canada	No one greeting a new comer and preferring to watch TV.
	Participants bringing their wives to conferences.
	In the UK, the manager visiting his employees to assign them a task & even waiting to talk to them if they are busy on the phone.
	Being arrested because slaughtering a goat on the first day of Eid (a Muslim festival of thanksgiving).
	Neighbors calling the police to stop the slaughtering of a sheep.
UK	UK friends checking if he is alive because he was fasting.
	An old lady not being visited by her daughter who lived nearby.
	People spending their free time reading books outside.
	A Korean roommate missing eating dog meat being surprised when the Omani asked him to eat cats.
	Putting shoes over the shelf being seen by the British as bringing bad luck to the family.
	Not refusing food when invited to visit a family.
Australia	A dancer in the city square asking her to dance with him.
	A male friend asking her for a hug.
	After a sport class people going naked into the shower room.
	Restaurant and shops all closed at 9:00 pm .
Germany	17th of July over 2 million couples going on a love march.
	Facing many challenges as a Muslim.
Norway	People wearing thin clothing when the temperature was 10 degree Celsius.
France	Wearing a scarf.
Turkey	Being invited by a Turkish business man for dinner and the Turkish man spitting over the knife as a tradition.
	The leadership role played by women.
Europe	Friends' daughter opening the door & wearing transparent clothes.
	Joining hands instead of shaking hands.
Japan	Only eating cornflakes because of being afraid of unknown food.
	The number of people in offices, classrooms and trains.
China	Being stopped by a Chinese women who thought she had lost her hair and asking her why.
	Renting broken cars then having to repair them.
Thailand	Prostitution being a normal job.
	People asking him for money because they believe he is rich (as he speaks Arabic).
	Fasting in India means eating fruits and non-cooked and food.
India	The continuous rain without any holidays.
	The bad smell and dirtiness outside clean houses.
	In India bride being responsible to pay dowry to the bridegroom.
	Egyptian boss asking 'why you are changing your clothes every day? Because rich?'
Egypt	Travelers returning to their flat finding the door closed because it was not actually rented to the owner.
Saudi Arabia	The place being very dirty and the roads disorganized.
Syria	A hotel employee not leaving the room because he was waiting for a tip.
	Paying for 60 seats in an empty bus instead of 5 seats.
Iran	And when 50 people enter later also asking them to pay.
Africa	Napping and relaxing during work being normal.

Table 14 and 15 do not reveal a clear distinction for each nationality as it is a qualitative survey. However, the cultural apprehension of Western expatriates living in Oman seems more focused on gender and religious issues. Interestingly, Omanis living in the US and in Europe also express similar values. Regarding Indians living in Oman, the cultural shock is more related to vegetarianism (See table 17).

Table 17. Comparative approach of culture shock issue summarized by key word

	Expatriates living in Oman	Omanis living abroad
<b>USA</b>	Men. Women. Dress. Eye contact. Muslim. Beer. Smoking. Way of Eating.	Naked people. Dance in church. Pork
<b>UK</b>	Male. Female. Ramadan. Time	Wife. Manager's carefulness. Slaughtering goat. Fasting.
<b>Germany</b>	Men. Women. Dress.	Naked people. Love march. Time. Muslim.
<b>India</b>	Cow. Food. Time. Dress	Environment. Money.

#### 4.3 Respondents' Reaction to Culture Shock

When asked about the intention of leaving a host county on account of the cultural shock, none of the respondents has answered in affirmative. Interestingly, we also found that this phenomenon is common among all nationalities, gender, expatriates working in Oman and for Omanis working abroad as well. In addition, when talking about the anxiety or awkwardness in meeting local people, the respondents expressed that didn't experience such difficulty. On the whole we did not find any significant observation regarding the ability for a specific nationality to adapt better or quicker than other. People even didn't express a honeymoon or a rejection of the host culture connected to the usual stages of cultural adaptation. Moreover, cultural shock was expressed as an event occurring at any moment of their stay in the host country.

#### 4.4 Explaining Culture Shock

Most of the culture shock categorized in our study have been discussed by researchers since the 1960s (Oberg, 1960; Hall, 1961; Hofstede, 1980; Schein, 1985; Trompenars & Hampden-Turner, 1998; Mitchell, 2000; Eschbach et al., 2001; Ferraro, 2006; Gilton, 2007; Storti, 2007; Chen et al., 2011). For instance Trompenars and Hampden-Turner (1998) state "Culture is man-made, confirmed by others, conventionalized and passed on for younger people or new comers. Over time the habitual interactions within communities take on familiar forms and structures, which we will call the organization of meaning. These structures are imposed upon the situations which people confront and are not determined by the situation itself". In the same way, our study confirms that when foreigners or local people face a culture shock they immediately define the identified behavior or attitude as being wrong.

In reality, unfamiliarity makes people unable to understand the ideology of others and how they should behave with them. Foreigners lose all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse and have to adapt to new lifestyles, living conditions and business practices in a new cultural setting. The real issue is that such unfamiliar circumstances require adaptation which is a lengthy and difficult process. These change cause emotional discomfort, psychological stress and confusion (Eschbach et al., 2001; Hess, 1994). For example, if we examine the physical space issue between Americans and Saudi Arabians we find that Americans need greater physical space to give respect, but Saudi Arabians perceive such physical space as unfriendly. In addition it would seem that smiling is appreciated everywhere, however expressing happiness and a friendly attitude in many Asian countries by smiling can be taken as a sign of weakness (Ferraro, 2006). Furthermore, our study highlights that the main symptoms of psychological disorientation and feelings of helplessness may affect the individual's decisions making and motivation for learning a new culture. In the extreme case, individuals may become hostile to host nationals and that will affect their interpersonal relationships with local people (Ferraro, 2006; Mio, 1999).

Our study also highlights the problems of communication (see Table 1). This issue is usually caused by a change of emotion from cheerful and relaxed to sad and depressed during the process of cultural adjustment (Hess, 1994). Communication also refers to the difference between high and low context. For example in the United States and Britain, more attention is paid to the content as verbal language and explanations dominate their communication. However, in high context countries such as Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, people focus more on nonverbal language, body language and facial expression (Mitchell, 2000).

In contrast to equalitarian culture, the hierarchical culture is organized by age, class, sex, ethnicity and so forth. As a result, the old or the wealthy have more status than other individuals and are addressed accordingly. For instance, older people are addressed by honorifics and not by their first names. In fact, all of this would govern the use of language, as well as how services are provided. For example in a collective society (see Table 4), one's status rests largely on one's family, tribe, ethnicity, or community. In such a society, individuals avoid failing or getting into trouble for fear of bringing shame to their families and communities. There is also a

certain level of protection for individuals in collective societies. On the other hand, individuals may be afraid of being creative or different. They may have difficulty escaping from their roots. By contrast, people in individualistic societies are freer to be eccentric, creative, or distant from their roots (Hall, 1961; Longstreet, 1978; Gilton, 2007). Regarding time orientation (see Table 12), people who originate from “doing cultures” emphasize the efficient use of time to finish tasks. By contrast individuals from “being cultures” tend to see time as infinite and are as concerned with the journey of life and the process of creation as they are with the finishing of tasks (Lane, 2002; Gilton, 2007).

When comparing the 14 categories of culture shock, religion and traditions seem to represent the key issues in our global world (see Table 10 and 13). The reason may come from the closeness and interrelation of those two categories. Our findings and assumptions are in line with Storti (2007) who states that “The most immediate and arguably the greatest danger in cultural incidents is that they cause expats to turn against the local people and vice versa”. From that statement arises the need to define the ambiguous term “tradition”. Otto and Pederson (2005) define tradition as a set of practices, rules, and rituals or symbolic nature which aims to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. Actually, the vital issue of continuity is surprisingly under theorized in anthropology in comparison to the theoretical attention devoted to the question of change. The authors also discuss the importance of habits with regard to tradition. Habits increase the skills with which actions are performed and decrease the fatigue that confronts people when dealing with new situations. Habit is central to social life and allows individuals to do a lot of actions automatically, thereby freeing up their attention to deal with the unexpected. The disposition to produce habits is genetically given, however they function in a different way from DNA which control reproduction in biological organisms.

With regard to religion, the findings suggest a deep misunderstanding when people’s behaviors are rooted in their religions, for instance, with Christians and Muslims (see Table 10). That behavioral gap may explain the current difficulties between those two religions around the world. According to Dutton (2011) religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by forming conceptions of a general account of existence. While comparing culture shock with religion, people can also pursue the experiential dimension. For instance, Oberg’s model (1960) seems to show religious experiences as entirely non-rational, a kind of emotional reaction to a culture. In addition, if we follow the “Cultural Relativism” and “Romanticism” in the European history, we can see how it has become a replacement religion; as a result “culture shock” is implicitly religious. Accordingly, the very process of culture shock is similar to that of a religious experience - possibly, a series of irrational reactions to an object.

## **5. Conclusion, Managerial Implications and Limitations**

### *5.1 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.

### *5.2 Managerial Implications*

Culture shock also found to be affecting the performance of expatriates in the workplace, because the expatriate may find the new environment too challenging to adjust to and produce results for the organization. When organizations are relocating their employees, naturally the former will be incurring high costs associated with this relocation. Hence, multinational organizations need to take every measure to minimize failure of their

employees in overseas assignments.

Both the organizations and individual employees assigned for foreign assignments are responsible to circumvent the unpleasant experiences with the culture shock. As such, it is important for the multinational to assess whether the person has the appropriate trait to adapt well in the new culture. In general, adaptability refers to an individual's ability to learn from experience and to use new experiences to improve the interpersonal relationships. Organizations can support expatriates by providing cross cultural training related to the host country which will shed clear light on the culture targeted. To avoid potential failures, organizations in fact, must take steps even before an executive is hired. In this case, recruitment and selection process can be used as an effective mechanism to gauge the cultural quotient (CQ), and Emotional Intelligence (EQ) of the potential executive as supported by Gabel et al., (2005) study. Emotional intelligence refers to being aware of oneself, understanding and relating to others, and being empathetic and managing one's emotions. In fact, it is seen as a critical factor in determining how an expatriate can adapt to the new environment. Expatriates who have high emotional intelligence are more likely to relate well with other local managers (in a new culture) and can also use emotions to better deal with challenging situation in a foreign country. It is not only necessary that the cross cultural training be given before an expatriate leaves the home country, but it should also continue after reaching the host country. By ensuring this is done an expatriate is not isolated in a foreign country thus preventing the executive from the onslaught of cultural shock. Moreover, by maintaining continued contact with the expatriate in a foreign country, the organization keeps a tab on the well being of the executive which will result in increased productivity and loyalty. Expatriates who are well traveled, who score high in cultural quotient and emotional intelligence would find less difficulty in blending with a new culture thus making the foreign assignment successful, not only for the organizations they work for, but also making them successful in the process.

As globalization is pervasive in nature, international managers are no longer constrained by national boundaries and they must be constantly aware of the influence of culture on management behavior. Hence, all executives in multinational corporations must be aware of the increasing pressures of globalization and should therefore strive to build an organization that accommodates cross-cultural management practices.

Our research aims to identify and to update the main categories of cultural shock. In addition we provide basic explanations with regard to existing studies. However our findings should be seen as exploratory and requiring further quantitative empirical studies to make *tradition* and *religion* valid as the main categories of culture shock in a global world.

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