

CULTURE SHOCK: A NEW LIFE OF AN INDONESIAN STUDENT ADAPTING TO THE U.S. LIFE

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Abstrak

Penulis dalam studi kualitatif ini meneliti pengalaman seorang mahasiswa internasional dalam aspek budaya dan sosial menggunakan data yang dikumpulkan melalui studi kasus tunggal dan wawancara informan yang terstruktur dan mendalam. Informan yang dimaksud adalah seorang perempuan asal Indonesia berusia 19 tahun yang belajar di College of Marin, San Francisco. Artikel ini mempertimbangkan dasar teori gegar budaya dan memerhatikan bagaimana mahasiswa tersebut beradaptasi dengan beberapa pola budaya baru di kehidupan kampus di Amerika Serikat. Pertama-tama, empat tahap gegar budaya dijabarkan. Selanjutnya, artikel ini menggambarkan rangkaian pengalaman dan perasaan informan ketika berhadapan dengan beberapa adaptasi dengan kehidupan dan budaya kampus di Amerika Serikat. Akhirnya, artikel ini menekankan beberapa poin nyata dari intensitas gegar budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Gegar Budaya, Kehidupan Kampus di Amerika Serikat, Adaptasi*

Abstract

The writer in this qualitative study examines international student's cultural and social experiences using data collected through a single case study and in depth, informant style interview. The informant is a 19-year-old Indonesian girl studying in College of Marin, San Francisco. This paper takes the theoretical base of culture shock into account and pays close attention to how an Indonesian student adapted to some new cultural patterns of the U.S. college life. First of all, the four stages of culture shock are elaborated. Next, it describes a sequence of experiences and feelings of the informant when dealing with some adaptation to the U.S. college life and culture. Finally, this paper emphasizes some noticeable points of the culture shock intensity.

Keywords: *Culture Shock, the U.S. College Life, Adaptation*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24014/sb.v16i2.6854>

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the overwhelming effect brought by the globalisation of world economies has triggered the urgency of cultural diversity awareness. Under this circumstance, cross-cultural communication has emerged to be a global issue (Oatey and Franklin, 2009; Martin and Nakayama, 2010; Patel, Li, and Sookninan, 2011). Supporting this view, Belhadi and Ayad (2017) and Totaj (2018) assert that self-orientation to adjust and adapt to a new culture is given more heed. Alternation of feelings and comfort usually causes communicational difficulties and problems during the cultural adjustment and adaptation process. Several studies (e.g., Jack, 2014; Saylag, 2014; Shieh, 2014; Daniela, 2015; Newsome, 2016; Narouz, 2018) have found out that this phenomenon has become common for those people who

encounter some cultural unfamiliarity in a new place. Particularly, Newsome (2016) state that this common phenomenon has considerably appealed to both cultural and social differences as a basis of discrimination.

Culture shock is generally perceived as a condition in which anger and apprehension increase without any existence of apparent reasons. Commonly, students, expatriates, immigrants, refugees, and even tourists face cultural shock. Narouz (2018) points out that there is a significant number of people who do not pay close attention to the massive amount of symbols, signs, as well as utterances that a particular society members use in their daily life until they have successfully adjusted and adapted to a new culture.

In this perspective, the current study resonates with previous studies emphasising on the difficulties that international students have when starting a new life in a host country. Saylag (2014), Shieh (2014), Daniela (2015), Newsome (2016), Belhadi and Ayad (2017), Narouz (2018) and Totaj (2018) claim in their studies that everyone who moves to a host country will go through a transition phase.

Taking into consideration what has been elaborated above, the current study has the primary purpose to reveal an international student's transition process. More specifically, it scrutinises the perceptions of a female Indonesian student enrolled in College of Marin, Marin County, San Francisco in 2017 regarding her experiences with culture shock and the reasons she ascribes for this phenomenon through an individualised interview.

METHOD

The writer intended to explore international student's personal accounts of the cultural and social experiences. Since cultural shock is a prominently personal life phase, a qualitative structured interview was applied in the current single case study. This aimed to provide the informant with a broader chance to frankly expose and express her feelings without any pressure. The qualitative methodology allows the writer to examine the informant's personal experiences.

The interview was done via email and Whatsapp as the informant is in San Francisco, the United States of America, while the interviewer lives in Pontianak, Indonesia. She participated in the interview consisting of 7 questions related to her efforts to cope with adapting to the U.S. college life and culture. The interview resulted into some versatile ideas in term of intercultural communication skills. Some descriptive data were gathered based on the informant's own words and personal interpretations.

In the interview, the questions were not direct but in a way that the interviewee could express the different feelings from each phase of culture shock. This approach was implemented because the interviewee did not know the theoretical concept of culture shock.

The informant was a 19-year-old Indonesian girl studying in College of Marin, San Francisco. Her name is kept confidential for security purposes. She used to take an English preparation course prior sitting the IELTS with the interviewer. Thus, it was an easy access to contact her. Nevertheless, the interviewer had invested some amount of time in keeping in touch with her through social media chatting service to maximise the trustworthiness. The data collected in the current study will be used only for research purpose. Anonymity and confidentiality of the informant are protected. According to Gebhard (2010) and Jones (2010), the phases of culture shock should be well perceived in order that prediction of the frustrations people may face in a recently discovered cultural nuance can be made. Each phase can emerge only at particular times and show various features.

Patel and Sooknanan (2011) describe 4 phases (a curve of which is illustrated as a U-curve below) of culture shock that portray a situation in which the entire process is thoroughly experienced by all people.



Figure 1. Culture Shock Curve proposed by Patel and Sooknanan (2011)

The honeymoon period is the initial phase that takes place when people arrive to a new culture and everything feels so good. Daniela (2015) points out that this stage make international students feel as they have discovered an utopia culture in which everything appears to be perfect. This stage can last from a few weeks to six months.

Next, the phase of culture shock shows up. Daniela (2015) additionally explains that the stage when everything seems to be beautiful has turned into a stage when everything is awful. In this phase, the feelings are related to confusion, frustration, fatigue, and stress. Homesick is also a common phenomenon in this stage. This idea is supported by Narouz (2018) who views homesickness as the most common symptom of culture shock which is followed by missing the home culture.

Then, the adjustment stage appears when people show some increased abilities to get used to meaningfully conforming to the new cultural model. By this time, people have discovered that communication and acceptance of differences are perfect ways of getting rid of culture shock.

Finally, the adaptation phase takes place. In this phase, the feel of comfort can be experienced in everyday situation. As soon as this phase has been reached, the new culture is completely acceptable. People eventually have the capability of tackling problems as well as managing new cultures successfully. Subsequently, the perceived change caused by culture shock fade away at great length.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The interview results, narratives, and discussions are organised in such a way that they suit the stages of feelings as explained in the culture shock stages (U-curve) above. A concise comprehension of the four stages may provide meaningful assistance for international students who face psychological impacts caused by culture shock.

Feeling Excited (Honeymoon Period)

Some initial excitement for both verbal and non-verbal cross-cultural communication is dominant. The interviewee perceived this atmosphere as a consequent advantage of moving to the United States. As admitted by the interviewee, the eye-catching panorama and landmarks of the host city are a source of delight.

It met my expectation. The countryside was beautiful and totally different from Pontianak. It's like a picture on the wall. I could benefit from walking on the street and enjoying the view. I lost some kilos! You know, I have always wanted to stay fit and slim, bahaha! (Question 1)

This is apparently in line with what Belhadi and Ayad (2017) point out. They claim that the initial excitement intertwines with the international students' vision of the future that is full of euphoria and expectation. Additionally, Daniela (2015) states that many of the international students arrive in the host country with very high and unrealistic initial expectation.

Feeling Anxious (Shock)

Reflecting an apprehensive state of emotion is common in the initial phase. It appeared to be apparent that the interviewee was nervous about having the verbal interaction in English language for the first time at the airport with some native speakers.

I have visited some airports, both local and international, for several times. But, it became the scariest moment of my life when I was in the airport on that day. I was nervous because the people spoke quickly. I had to ask them to speak more slowly.

(Questions 4 and 5)

The interviewee particularly also had apprehension about finding the right transport from the airport to the university city.

Oh my god! The experience of transporting to the university was terrible. I had no idea how to catch the taxi! I tried so hard. I was a little bit nervous, a little bit confused because, 'where is it?' I mean I don't know San Fransisco at all because I haven't been here before.

(Question 6)

Apprehension about finding the right public transport is also elaborated by Totaj (2018) in his study. He explains that this sentiment may be interpreted as a threat, which in turn may impose stress.

Feeling Adrift (Shock)

The interviewee revealed that she felt awkward when arriving at the destination, particularly unfamiliar physical surroundings.

When we visit a new country, we have to respect something, but when we don't know anything, how can we respect something? What could I do? I had to get used to it.

(Question 3)

Shieh (2014) mentions that international students would encounter unfamiliar environments that leads to confusion. Confusion was clearly seen as the interviewee's ultimate

challenge when facing unfamiliar physical surroundings.

Feeling Depressed (Shock)

The interviewee admitted that feeling depressed in a new environment had commonly been faced by her. It was not that easy to face the “end” of a relationship that had occurred before her departure.

The hardship was overwhelming to me. I had to say goodbye to all my family members and friends. I got depressed. Physically, I felt very good. Emotionally, I couldn't even sleep well at night.

(Question 2)

Belhadi and Ayad (2017) similarly claim in their study that many international students face anxiety and frustration as the most hurtful psychological symptoms of culture shock.

Longing for Home (Shock)

Homesickness occurred in the first few weeks. This view is in line with Narouz (2018) who asserts that the most common symptom of culture shock is homesickness which is followed by missing the home culture. The interviewee frankly expressed her sadness because of longing for home that subsequently made her cry everyday in the first few weeks.

I missed hanging out with my family. The first few months, I had no friends. Loneliness was around me all the time and crying was not unfamiliar to me. Every night I just thought of the same question: Go back or not?

(Question 2)

Being Stressed (Shock)

The ultimate source of most annoyance was the frustration, a word commonly used by the majority of students when dealing with the academic workload, including the interviewee.

Sometimes I could not sleep. I didn't know why. I didn't get up, I just tried to lie on my bed, one hour later, I gave up, I got up. Too much study and work on the projects. Sometimes, I forgot to eat. I was so worried about my results.

(Question 6)

Several studies (e.g., Jack, 2014; Saylag, 2014; Shieh, 2014; Daniela, 2015; Newsome, 2016; Narouz, 2018) have similarly pointed out that many international students deal consciously or

unconsciously with culture shock that transfers them huge amount of stress.

Feeling Excited (Adjustment and Adaptation)

The successful adjustment that results into adaptation is typically depicted by a nuance of joy. During this stage, the interviewee gained both self-confidence and the ability to live in the new culture. The interviewee described herself (after some time and many efforts) as feeling delighted about a number of various aspects of her life in the U.S.

I struggled so hard to get accustomed to the food, the weather, the language, everything that I had to face every time I opened my eyes in the morning. The academic situations are just something that every student around the world has to deal with. Now, I am enjoying every minute of it.

(Question 7)

In the light of the statement above, it is clearly indicated that individuation has taken part which portrays a significantly positive adjustment to life in the U.S. This view is supported by Newsome (2016) who asserts that the adaptation in the transition stage proceeds with the recovery stage in which international students are subsequently able to develop insight into their own identities. This soothing stage consequently enables them to get comfortably engaged in the host country situations.

CONCLUSION

Culture shock is a personal experience which results from a number of factors that vary from individual to individual. Thorough understanding of a new culture may result into positive impacts that enhance the individual capacity to adapt to the new circumstances. The interview results imply particular patterns of interpersonal interaction in the host country. This phenomenon includes both quality and quantity of interactions within the host country and towards the new comers that consequently influence culture shock intensity.

This is a small-scale study that resonates with previous studies emphasising on the challenges that international students face when adjusting to the new environment. The significant contribution of this study is the detailed account that the informant provides about her personal

experiences. A particular concern is the sense that the informant expresses the view that she struggles to tackle her homesickness and academic frustration. Nonetheless, she personally believes that she has gained personal enrichment from this experience. This tentative conclusion should form the bases for further and large-scale research into these important issues.

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