

Living the Cultural Experience of Studying Abroad

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The term culture refers to the values, beliefs, customs, worldviews, and behaviors shared by members of a group. While studying abroad you will experience culture in numerous ways: you will be **adjusting to the host culture** and you will **come to close contact with cultures** of other international students. **Your own culture** will act as lens through which you will perceive your interaction with the new cultures. Culture will also **condition your communication** with others, both the natives and the international students. Throughout this multifold process of encountering new cultures, you will experience culture shock. **Culture shock** is mostly characterized by a range of emotions, such as anxiety, and dealing with **cultural differences**. You will learn that people abroad behave differently and have different customs, or that some everyday activities, such as shopping or discussions in class, are done quite differently from what you are used to seeing back home. Culture shock happens to everyone in varying degrees, it is a normal part of adjusting to a new culture and it can increase your understanding of the host culture, the cultures of other international students, and yourself. In order to deal with culture shock effectively, you need to prepare yourself and know **what to expect**. With all the necessities to consider when traveling abroad – packing everything you need, having all important papers and tickets, worrying about boarding your flight successfully and finding your bus – getting concerned about what to expect of the new cultures seems the least important. The following gives you an insight into some of the most common expectations regarding the Czech culture with the goal to share with you some useful tips how to mitigate your culture shock and allow yourself to appreciate the host culture and the cultures of other foreign students.

Expectations and stereotypes

First it should be noted that any expectations you have about attitudes and behavior of members of a cultural group, e.g. Czech culture, are generalizations that may not be applicable to all the members of the group. Nevertheless, when it comes to expectations we do not usually view others as individuals with unique personal traits but we categorize them based on group characteristics and we assume that the characteristics apply to most of the members of the group. In this way our expectations are formed through our stereotypes. For example, the Czechs are internationally recognized as beer-lovers. Having just learnt that, you will expect to see many beer drinkers in the Czech Republic and your expectation will probably be met (that's because national stereotypes are based at least on some partial truth). You will then label the Czechs as beer drinkers.

Some of you will now decide against knowing what to expect, trying instead to experience the new cultures and their people first hand and with open minds. This is certainly praiseworthy, but the cultural truth is that stereotypes are rather a common part of getting to know about other cultures and they will influence most of your communication with the natives and the international students. The international students visiting Masaryk University in the past years also dealt with stereotypes of the Czech and other cultures. The following part lists and explains the most common stereotypes the international students hold about the Czech culture.

Stereotypes of Czechs and how to deal with them

The Czechs are considered to be reserved, cold, quite, not smiling as much or even sad. It is further said that the Czechs do not speak English. The international students arrive to these generalizations thanks to their first hand experience, they learn about them from other students, from their parents and friends back home, or they read about them on the Internet. While there might be some truth about the stereotypes, it is essential to understand the cultural processes forming behind them.

Firstly, your first experience of the new culture will be affected by your culture shock. During the first stage of culture shock you will see the new culture through your own "cultural filters" through which you will keep noticing cultural differences. You will compare the differences with the cultural practices of your own culture. For example, you will notice that the customary way of greeting among the Czechs is a handshake, while you are used to giving two kisses. When seeing this difference you may rate your way of greeting higher than the Czechs' hand shake and you will be a short step from the conclusion that the Czechs are colder than the people of your culture. Judging other culture's habits and practices from the perspective of one's own culture and rating one's own cultural practices, values, behavior as better than those of the new culture is called **ethnocentrism**. Ethnocentrism is a very common part of cultural shock and shapes the first encounters with the new culture. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the filter of your own culture will affect what you see in the host culture and the cultures of other international students.

The stereotypes of Czechs can be further explained by going under the surface of cultural practices, observing the host culture closely and without preconceived notions. Drawing on the experience of the international students visiting the Czech Republic in the past four years, the situations in which they viewed the Czechs as cold, unfriendly, and quiet typically involved asking for direction, meeting the natives in the streets, customer service behavior (in a restaurant, shop, etc.), and use of the public transportation (bus and tram).

When asking the way some students expressed their concerns that the local people refused to communicate with them or just gestured to them that they did not speak English. The students found the natives' behavior cold and distant. To explain the behavior, the Czechs generally do not trust strangers and tend to avoid talking with speakers of other languages because they are not confident enough of their English language skills. Their behavior should be understood as an attempt to escape from the uncertain situation and embarrassment, not as an act of hostility. Most international students eventually realized that the problem lied in the natives' use of English and started to use simpler English and learnt some basic phrases in Czech language, such as „prosím vás“ (*please*); „promiňte“ (*excuse me*); „Nemluvím česky. Můžete mi pomoci?“ (*I don't speak Czech. Can you help me?*). Approaching the natives with a sentence in Czech, no matter how poorly pronounced, breaks the ice, which illustrates an experience of a student from Mexico who, with a broken Czech, asked a man for direction to the campus. The man did not speak English but wanted to help so he walked the student all the way to the campus.

The story above points to another stereotype: the Czechs do not speak English. Quite many international students who tried to speak with the local people in English would accept the stereotype as valid. However, making generalizations about foreign language skills of the Czechs will affect your communication. If you decide to follow the expectation that the Czechs do not speak English, or any other foreign languages, it may spoil your potential conversation with the locals or prevent you entirely from deepening your first hand experience with the host culture. On the other hand, ignoring the stereotype while establishing contact with the host culture will lead you to the finding that certain groups of the Czechs, for example young people, do speak English and some of them, such as the students of Masaryk University, can communicate with you in English and other languages. Dealing with stereotypes and not accepting them as true prior to your experience will enable you to learn more about the host and your own culture, as the following situations clearly show.

Walking down the streets of the city, the international students noticed that the local people hardly ever smile. The Czechs are considered by many a non-smiling culture. Whereas in most of the western cultures a smile is an essential part of the communication etiquette, for the Czechs a smile is primarily a facial expression through which they display their emotions. If the Czechs do not return your smile, it does not mean that they are being unfriendly; they just do not convey their emotions to people they do not know. The Czechs do not necessarily communicate politeness through smiling, instead they use words such as “dobrý den“ (*hello*), „děkuji“ (*thank you*), „prosím“ (*you are welcome*). This is also true of the behavior of the staff in shops and restaurants.

Many international students were surprised to see how quiet the local people are on public transportation. Sitting on the bus or tram surrounded by complete silence was a new experience for most of the students. This does not mean that the Czechs are reserved and do not communicate in public, as many of the international students initially thought. The Czechs actually do engage in conversations in public, but largely with people they know and at a lower level of voice. They are more soft-spoken because it is a norm not to disturb others on public transportation or elsewhere in public (banks, shops, etc.). As the international students used the buses and trams on everyday basis, they gradually got used to the silence and some of them even started to appreciate the relative peacefulness in the streets and on public transportation.

When encountering people on the trams and buses, some international students got an impression that the Czechs kept staring at them. Again, this has several possible explanations. If you behave too loudly on public transportation, the people will frown or stare at you to signal disapproval with your behavior. Staring may also reflect people’s curiosity about you, because they can recognize (through your speech, appearance, etc.) that you are a foreigner. Further, during culture shock you may get preoccupied with thoughts how the people around accept you and you become more attentive to their looks.

Stereotypes are rather unavoidable in situations when you are facing unfamiliar cultural practices and behavior. Stereotypes help you to arrange what you see in the new culture into a comprehensible picture. However, although the resulting picture will make sense to you, it will remain just a simplification of the complex reality of the new culture. Stereotypes are frequent especially where people of different cultures meet. In the classes and at the university dormitories you are going to spend time together with students of various nationalities. In your initial contacts

you will be likely referring to others as members of homogenous national groups, rather than as students of unique personalities. You will recognize others as an American guy, a Spanish girl, a young man from Poland, and you will assume that the American guy will be proud of his country, the Spanish girl will be late for her classes, and the Polish man will drink alcohol. Stereotypes will influence your perception of others and will challenge your communication with the students of other nations and cultures. But gradually you will move from recognizing others based on assumed group similarities or differences to identifying them as someone you share a lot with: as your classmates, the students from the same dormitory, friends you like to travel with, as (Erasmus) students who are in the same boat.

You are in the same boat: Tips and Ideas for Cultural Adaptation

- **Be open-minded** and ready to change your expectations: do not accept stereotypes uncritically but take them as a challenge; observe the new culture closely and without making hasty judgments, try to be objective.
- **Being ethnocentric is OK.** Comparing cultural differences you see in the new culture with what you are used to seeing back home helps you to cope with culture shock. Share your views of cultural differences with others in your in-groups (i.e., with your friends, students of the same nationality, other international students, etc.). This way you will also overcome homesickness.
- **Be yourself:** You do not represent only your country, be yourself and seek in others their personal identity as well.
- **Become aware of** how your own culture influences your communication with others: you may interpret a message differently from others, you may see things differently than others, perhaps you are being ethnocentric, your nonverbal signals are not understood, etc.

Sometimes it was because I was so surprised that people in other countries do things so differently from my own city (...) while sometimes I appreciated something can be done in a different way (...) No matter whether I felt positive or negative, I started to be aware of my own culture and realize the cultural differences.

(student from Hong Kong)

- Talk about misunderstanding and cultural incidents you experience in the new culture: clarifying misunderstanding is important, do not remain silent and do not expect others to understand what you say and what you mean; meanings differ from culture to culture.
- Don't be afraid to ask when you do not understand others' language and/or culture:

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you say/what you mean... Could you say that again/Could you clarify your point to me?"

- **Share your experience with other students and respect** each others' cultures. You are in the same boat:

We are more opened and we accept more easily the differences in terms of culture because we belong to the same group - we are all Erasmus students.

(student from Romania)

I feel that because we are all so different here, specifically Erasmus students, finding common ground is exciting. I know I have a lot to offer to someone and having something in common helps break the tension (...) That is because all Erasmus students are here for generally the same thing, to gain something from others while being forced to include themselves in a foreign society

(student from the U.S.)

I am in the Czech Republic since September and I can say that this Erasmus is one of the most satisfactory experiences of all my life. Why? Because for me it is so exciting to be able to share my opinion, my believes, my culture, my language and my life with people (...)The best of this is that they teach you new interesting things that, until that moment, were unknown for me.

(student from Spain)