



# Cultural Adaptation Models

...for AFS & Friends

The use of models to explain the cultural adaptation process is invaluable because they show that many of the challenges one encounters during an intercultural experience are normal and expected. Cultural adaptation is considered to be the process of adjusting to a new culture different from our own. Cultural adaptation models deal with the time and the process of a person assimilating to these kinds of differences of a new culture. They also allow sojourners to prepare for such challenges by developing constructive coping strategies in advance.

It is necessary to take multiple models into consideration when explaining or analyzing the adaptation process, as the adjustment challenges presented in a single model do not necessarily exist in every individual or situation, nor does any one model address all aspects of the cultural adaptation process.

## THREE ADAPTATION FRAMEWORKS

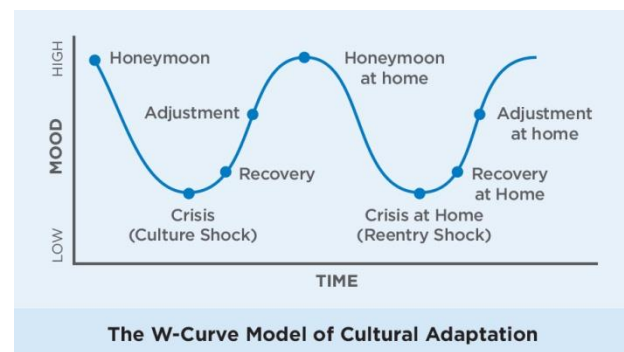
Acculturation is the change that takes place in an individual or in a society by being exposed to different culture for a longer period of time. Colleen Ward, an expert on acculturation, has defined three adaptation frameworks: 1) stress and coping, 2) culture learning and 3) social identification. Below are descriptions of several well-known and internationally accepted models, according to Ward's frameworks.

### 1 - STRESS AND COPING

The stress and coping framework focuses on affective components of the adaptation process. Topics pertaining to this framework include coping mechanisms for culture shock and acculturation stress.

### U- AND W-CURVE MODELS OF INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT (OBERG; GULLAHORN & GULLAHORN)

The U-Curve model, developed by Kalvero Oberg (1954), utilizes the form of the letter "U" to describe the emotional ups and downs that occur during intercultural sojourns. It applies to the time spent in a foreign culture and suggests that a sojourner begins her/his intercultural experience with high spirits, yet drops to a more negative state after the initial "honeymoon" period ends, eventually regaining a positive perspective as s/he becomes more

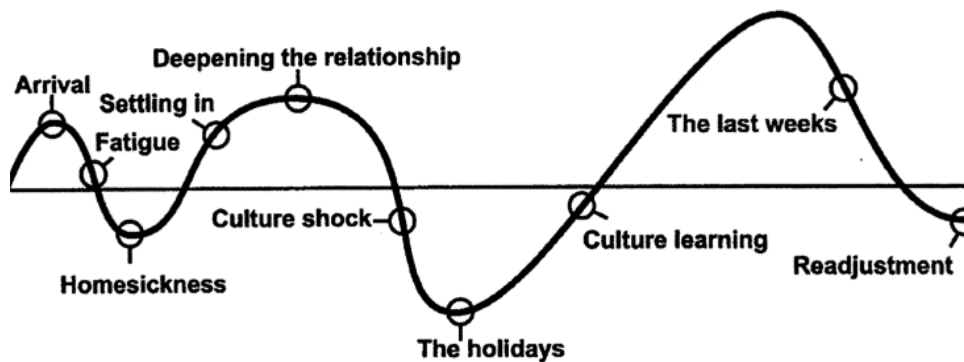


comfortable in the host culture.

The W-Curve, created by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), simply adds another “U” to the U-Curve model. This second U depicts the sojourner’s experience upon her/his return home. It suggests that, once home, the sojourner again experiences a negative emotional dip during the re-entry process, but regains a positive outlook as time passes.

## CULTURAL ADAPTATION MODEL/THE ADJUSTMENT CYCLE (BETTINA HANSEL)

Bettina Hansel (2007), who supported AFS for 29 years, came up with the Adjustment Cycle, which looks at a sojourn more detailed than Oberg’s U-Model:



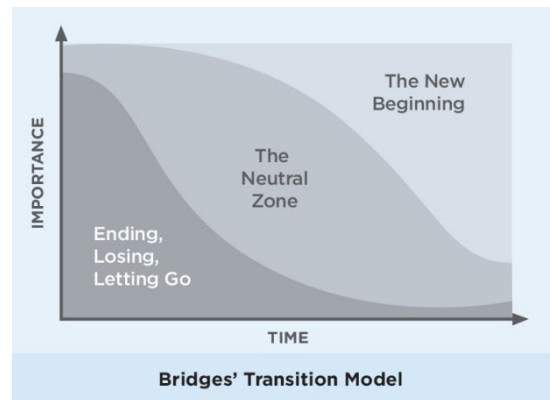
Betsy Hansel's Cultural Adaptation Model

Initially, the arrival in the new host country can be experienced very differently. Some sojourners may be very excited, others more anxious about their experience. Exhaustion and fatigue can follow due to all new impressions or language difficulties. This phase could deteriorate into homesickness as the first emotional low point during the stay abroad. As times pass, the sojourner regains a positive outlook, develops more cultural understanding and starts to settle in. This leads to deepened relationships, a time when the sojourner stops being a houseguest. As a next step, Hansel forecasts a culture shock, where differences to the home country become more obvious and confusion and discomfort can occur. Holidays can be an especially challenging time because of different traditions in family and community celebrations. After recovering from these difficult stages, the sojourner gains confidence and is ready to learn more about his/herself and the host country’s culture. During the last weeks, confusion, sadness or excitement are common feelings which can again cause exhaustion. Like Gullahorn & Gullahorn, Hansel sees a need of readjustment when the sojourner comes back to his or her home country.

The U-, W-Curves and the Adjustment Cycle are an attractive way to show general emotional ups and downs that occur during the sojourn; however, they are not applicable to everyone’s experience.

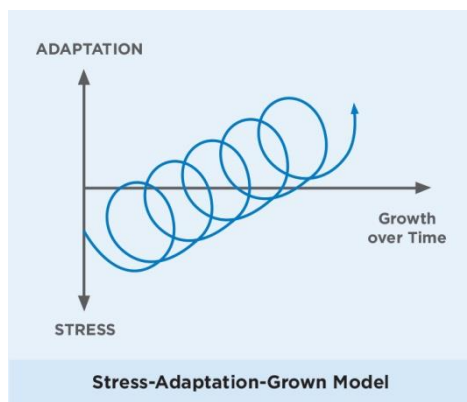
## TRANSITION MODEL (W. BRIDGES)

The Transition model, by William Bridges (1980, 2004) depicts all transitions (in our case, cultural adjustments) as having three phases, beginning with 1) an ending phase, or letting go of the familiar, and is associated with a feeling of sadness. Next is 2) the neutral zone, where s/he emotionally disconnects from the past. A person in this phase is neither excited nor sad, and often feels a mixture of anxiety, curiosity, and skepticism. Eventually, the sojourner advances to 3) a new beginning when the sojourner is emotionally able to accept and welcome the change. In the case of cultural adaptation, this could mean embracing the new culture. Although only one stage predominates at a time, Bridges argues that all three stages are present simultaneously throughout the entire adaptation process.



There are three things that Bridges advises every support volunteer or staff do when assisting a student in her/his transition process: 1) show concern for this person's feelings and thoughts, 2) communicate very clearly what will happen and where the transition will lead, and 3) try to connect to the sojourner, for example, by telling about a similar situation the volunteer/staff experienced and how s/he resolved it.

## STRESS-ADAPTATION-GROWTH MODEL (Y.Y. KIM)



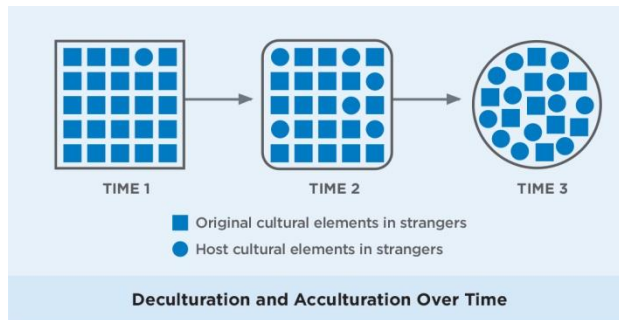
The Stress-Adaptation-Growth model, by Young Yun Kim (2001), proposes that cultural adaptation and personal growth happen gradually, in a spiral-like process. The sojourner alternates between stressful experiences and the eventual growth and adaptation that result from the challenge. Each successive stressful situation takes the sojourner to a higher level of adaptation. The message of this model is that the **challenges sojourners face are important for personal growth and it is by experiencing difficulties that we learn and adapt**, or, in other words, grow. Also it is important to notice that the model shows an ongoing process where you do not go back to the

starting point but continue going up the spiral because every crisis leads to new learning and growth. With time, adaptation becomes easier. As the spiral advances, less and less stress is experienced, and more and more adaptation is achieved.

## 2 - CULTURAL LEARNING

Cultural learning, the behavioral framework, refers to the process of acquiring necessary social knowledge and skills in order to thrive in the new culture. These include language fluency, appropriate non-verbal communication, social etiquette and factual information.

## MODEL OF DECULTURATION AND ACCULTURATION OVER TIME (Y.Y. KIM)



The model of Deculturation and Acculturation Over Time, by Young Yun Kim (1988, 2001), demonstrates how, as the sojourner spends more time in the host culture, s/he incorporates more aspects of that culture into her/his beliefs, behaviors and values. Eventually, the sojourner “re-arranges their mental furniture” such that their worldview adjusts to accommodate both new and old cultural values, norms and behaviors, resulting

in a new construct. It takes many years of considerable exposure to a new culture for someone to achieve Time 3. It is useful for AFS support volunteers and staff to keep in mind that, **for most students, the AFS journey helps them move from Time 1 to Time 2 and that students should not expect to achieve complete acculturation solely through their AFS experience.**

## 3 - SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

Lastly, social identification, the cognitive framework, looks at how individuals or groups view themselves and the effects of stereotypes and discrimination on their identity. It is concerned with the shifting of individual, cultural and social identities, a process that occurs unavoidably during an intercultural experience.

## ACCULTURATION MODEL (J. BERRY)

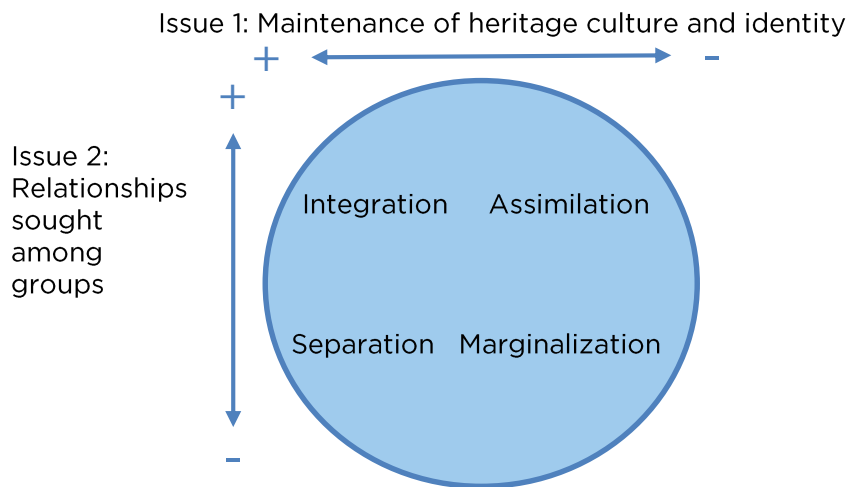
J. Berry (2001) developed a model of acculturation that explains attitudes and their resulting strategies of two different cultural groups that are interacting. Looking at non-dominant groups in a larger society Berry identifies the following acculturation indicators:

**The extent of people seeking (or avoiding) contact with people outside their own group.**

**The extent of people wishing to maintain (or give up) their cultural heritage and identity.**

These acculturation attitudes lead to four different strategies. When individuals from the non-dominant group wish for contact with other cultural beings and do not attach a lot of importance to cultural maintenance, they follow the strategy of **assimilation**. In case they seek interaction but also wish to keep up their cultural identity, the strategy of **integration** is chosen. Should there be no interest in contact with people outside their own group and people place a value on maintaining their culture, the strategy is called **separation**. **Marginalization** represents the strategy to neither seek intercultural interaction nor cultural maintenance.

Berry’s model is based on the assumption that people are free to choose their strategy of intercultural interactions, though it is important to notice that this freedom is not always given in reality due to political or social circumstances. This shows that the choice of strategy correlates with the bigger societies since they also have a preferred way for sojourners to adapt which leads to an interdependence of the smaller group and the larger society.



J. Berry's model of acculturation

## CONCLUSIONS

These are just some of the models that can be used to explain the cultural adjustment process. There is no perfect model for such a complex process and each of those presented here helps to explain a different aspect of cultural adaptation, from an affective, behavioral or cognitive perspective. It is beneficial for AFS volunteers and staff to be familiar with several models, in order to apply the most appropriate one to a specific context.

### Cultural Adaptation Models...

- ✓ vary in how they present the processes of cultural adaptation: there is not just *one* perfect model.
- ✓ make the abstract concrete, often providing a visual for understanding cultural adaptation processes.
- ✓ cover the ABCs: the Affective, Behavioral and Cognitive elements of cultural adaptation.
- ✓ allow AFS volunteers and staff to support sojourners in ways that are appropriate for a specific context and person by taking a variety of models into consideration.

### For more information:

- C. Ward, (2004). *The Psychology of Culture Shock*.
- J.E. & J.T. Gullahorn, (1963). *An extension of the U-curve hypothesis*.
- Y. Y. Kim, (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*.
- W. Bridges, (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*
- J. Berry, (2001). *A Psychology of Immigration*.
- B. Hansel, (2007). *The Exchange Student Survival Kit*.
- K. Oberg, (1954). *Culture Shock*.