

A Situational Approach for Assessing and Teaching Acculturation

Andrew Molinsky
Brandeis University

This article introduces a situational approach for assessing and teaching acculturation that captures how a person's level of competence and authenticity in a foreign cultural setting varies across the various situations the person encounters. Whereas previous research, such as the U-curve and Berry's dual identification model, portrays cultural adaptation at a broad, general level, the current approach provides a more nuanced perspective on acculturation by taking into account situational variability as well as variability in experienced competence and authenticity. The benefits of the framework for cross-cultural training and education are illustrated within the context of foreign MBA students in the United States.

Keywords: *acculturation; culture; cross-cultural; education; training; U-curve*

As organizations continue to globalize, growing proportions of people are working and studying abroad. When these people attempt to operate in foreign settings with unfamiliar rules for behavior, their experiences acculturating will vary with each situation they encounter. In some situations, a person may feel competent at enacting the new culture's rules to produce the correct behavior, but feel inauthentic when doing so even if his or her behavior is considered appropriate for the situation. The reverse is also possible: In other situations abroad, the same person may struggle to produce culturally consistent behavior but have little discomfort engaging in this behavior from the perspective of his or her intact system of cultural values and beliefs.

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In this article, I introduce a situational approach for assessing and teaching acculturation that captures how a person's level of competence and authenticity in a foreign cultural setting differs across the various situations the person encounters. The situational approach overcomes many of the weaknesses of other common frameworks, such as the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) and Berry's dual identification approach (Berry, 2003), which do not incorporate situational differences into their portrayal of the cultural adaptation process. The approach is taught through an interactive classroom exercise in which individuals create a personalized acculturation portfolio that captures their level of competence and authenticity across a series of key situations they experience in the foreign cultural setting. *Experienced competence* refers to how capable a person feels from a task performance standpoint at acting in a culturally appropriate manner in a particular situation in a new culture (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sandberg, 2000). Competence has long been viewed by scholars as a core challenge of cultural adaptation (e.g., Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). To be competent in a foreign culture, an individual must possess sufficient knowledge and awareness of the norms and values of a foreign culture (Earley & Ang, 2003) and also have the capacity to translate this cultural knowledge into effective behavior in concrete situations (Molinsky, 2007; Thomas & Ravlin, 1995).

Alongside the challenge of developing competence in a foreign setting is the difficulty individuals face when norms for appropriate behavior in the new culture conflict with cultural values and beliefs from their native cultural setting. *Experienced authenticity* refers to the degree of congruence a person perceives between these new cultural norms and his or her own intact values and beliefs (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). When the norms for appropriate behavior in a situation in the new culture conflict with a person's core values and beliefs, the person can feel inauthentic, anxious, and distressed when attempting to follow the new cultural rules (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985; Elliot & Devine, 1994). In contrast, when a person experiences a fit between his or her cultural values and beliefs and the norms for behavior in the new environment, the experience of crossing cultures can feel comfortable and natural (Molinsky, 2007).

For example, a Chinese MBA student in the United States might feel competent publicly voicing his or her opinion in a classroom setting, having mastered norms for class participation in the United States. However, he or she might simultaneously feel inauthentic engaging in this behavior, because active participation in class conflicts with Chinese cultural values regarding power distance (Hofstede, 1980; Javidan & House, 2001),

communication directness/indirectness (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000), and assertiveness (Javidan & House, 2001). The reverse is also possible: In a different situation, such as making small talk with a colleague at school, the student may experience little threat to authenticity, because making small talk does not conflict with his or her cultural values or beliefs; however, he or she may feel incompetent in the situation, unsure of his or her ability to choose appropriate discussion topics, and worried about being perceived as too serious for the situation.

Limitations of Current Approaches for Assessing and Teaching Acculturation

Despite the importance of understanding the variability in a person's level of acculturation across situations, existing approaches for teaching and assessing acculturation, such as the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) and Berry's dual identification model (Berry, 2003), do not capture cultural adaptation as it varies across situations or as people vary in their authenticity and competence levels within these situations.

Perhaps the most popular method of teaching and training acculturation, judged by its prevalence in training curricula and in international management textbooks, is the U-curve, which tracks a person's general, overall degree of cultural adjustment over time (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). According to the U-curve hypothesis of cultural adaptation, as articulated by Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960) in its original formulations, cultural adaptation unfolds in a three-stage process: the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage, and the recovery stage.

Although the notion of the U-curve has commonsense appeal and serves as the basis for cross-cultural training (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998), evidence is mixed as to whether acculturation actually occurs in this stepwise progression (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Church, 1982; Kealey, 1989; Ward et al., 1998). In fact, some researchers have found an opposite pattern: Individuals experience heightened levels of psychological distress during the "honeymoon" period (Ward et al., 1998). Nevertheless, the U-curve model remains a popular method for portraying acculturation and cultural adaptation.

A second common way of conceptualizing acculturation, which also focuses on general psychological comfort in a foreign setting, is Berry's "dual identification" approach (Berry, 2003), which captures acculturation through the lens of "identification." According to this framework, individuals

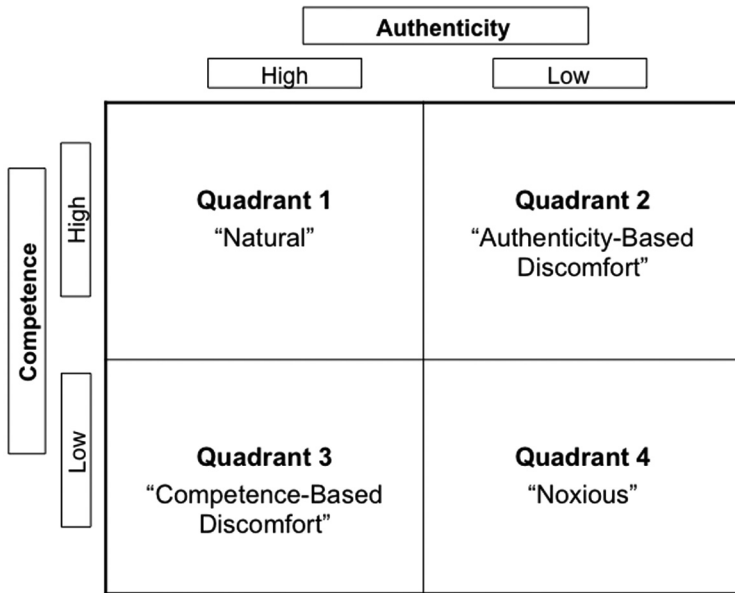
in a foreign setting can simultaneously identify with the foreign setting and also retain identification with their native culture. These two dimensions (identification with native culture and identification with new culture) suggest four general acculturation “strategies” that individuals pursue, depending on their levels of identification with the native and new cultural systems. “Integration” entails maintaining one’s native cultural identity, while also adopting the foreign identity as well. “Assimilation” involves relinquishing one’s native heritage in favor of the new cultural values and beliefs. “Separation” entails maintaining one’s identification with the native culture without adopting the new cultural values. Finally, “marginalization” entails distancing oneself from both the new and the native cultures.

Both the U-curve and the dual identification approach are useful for identifying a person’s general level of comfort or well-being in a foreign setting. Neither, however, captures acculturation as it varies across situations or as people vary in their authenticity and competence levels within these situations. As a result, despite the general insight these frameworks provide, they miss important opportunities for training and teaching acculturation by aggregating cultural adaptation across situations and therefore overlooking situational variability.

The notion of aggregating cultural adaptation across situations can be compared with aggregating weather patterns across days (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). For certain purposes, such as making a decision to visit a new city, it is useful to understand that one city, San Francisco, has a colder climate *overall* compared with another city, San Diego. But such an approach that collapses weather across days does not help one understand how the weather will differ by days in the week, obviously a critical piece of information to know for planning one’s activities. Similarly, understanding one’s general state of being in a foreign setting may be useful for certain purposes, but it misses important variability across the myriad of encounters that constitute one’s cross-cultural experience. In certain types of situations in a foreign setting, an individual may feel competent and authentic; in other situations, the person may feel competent but not authentic, or vice versa; in yet other situations, the individual may feel both incompetent and inauthentic.

A situational approach offers conceptual leverage for capturing this complexity and variability, helping to identify situations in which one thrives versus those in which one struggles, by pinpointing the roles that competence and authenticity play. Such an approach enables nonnatives as well as trainers or teachers to develop a more complex and nuanced view

Figure 1
Acculturation Assessment Framework



of the nonnative's current level of cultural adaptation. Although existing frameworks certainly incorporate both competence and authenticity implicitly into their approaches as factors influencing one's mood, satisfaction, or degree of identification at various stages of the acculturative process, the approach developed here considers these dimensions explicitly for each situation a person encounters in a foreign setting.

Figure 1 captures the logic of the approach. Each situation (e.g., engaging in small talk, interviewing for a job, giving constructive criticism, participating in a meeting) that a person encounters in a foreign culture can be located in one of the four quadrants in the 2×2 diagram illustrated in Figure 1. In Quadrant 1 situations, those in which an individual feels highly competent and also authentic engaging in the new behavior, the experience of cultural adaptation is easy and natural. In Quadrant 2 situations, the adaptation experience is easy from the standpoint of competence but difficult and unnatural in terms of how these new behaviors

feel juxtaposed against the person's ingrained values and identity; as a result, individuals will feel authenticity-based discomfort. Quadrant 3 represents the mirror image of Quadrant 2: situations in which an individual experiences discomfort not because of feelings of inauthenticity but because of incompetence. In these situations, a person feels comfortable from a values and identity perspective but incompetent at executing the necessary behaviors for acting in a culturally appropriate manner. The final cell, Quadrant 4, represents situations in which a person feels incompetent and also inauthentic. These situations are noxious because the individual experiences psychological distress about engaging in behavior that violates or conflicts with his or her personal values and beliefs and that also generates anxiety because of a lack of knowledge and proficiency.

Educators and trainers can use this framework to help individuals create their own acculturation profile by taking the array of situations they regularly encounter in their daily life at work, at school, or in social settings and assigning each situation to one of the four quadrants. Furthermore, as I describe shortly, individuals can create a similar framework for how they experience the same situations at home. Juxtaposing these two frameworks together, one capturing authenticity and competence in situations in the foreign setting and one capturing competence and authenticity for these same situations at home, people can not only understand—in a more nuanced way than existing acculturation frameworks allow—why they might struggle or thrive abroad, but also understand the distinctive role that culture plays in determining this experience.

Whereas existing frameworks capture a person's level of acculturation at a very broad, general level, the perspective introduced and illustrated here, within the context of foreign MBA students in the United States, captures a person's acculturation profile as it varies across common situations in the foreign setting that the person regularly encounters. The framework can be used as a practical tool for identifying the source of challenges individuals face in foreign cultural settings, thereby enabling them to develop an action plan based on their cultural diagnosis for improving competence and learning to cope with feelings of dissonance resulting from value-inconsistent behavior. The framework can be quite useful as a practical tool for identifying training needs and for helping to structure and design training germane to an individual's needs. In short, the framework allows both for a more realistic and nuanced evaluation of cultural adaptation as well as for more focused training and educational initiatives based on this evaluation.

Illustrative Example: Foreign MBA Students in the United States

I created this framework for an MBA class about managing across cultures to help students (75% of whom were nonnative students studying in the United States) make sense of their levels of acculturation and develop ways to cope with the situations that caused them the most difficulty. The exercise has particular resonance for foreign students, as they are currently operating in a foreign environment. However, American-born students also find the exercise useful—especially those with recent experience living or working abroad—as it helps them make sense of these recent experiences.

The exercise generates for students a snapshot of their acculturation “profile” at a given point in time. This snapshot can be compared with future snapshots at later points in the cultural adaptation process, as individuals increase or decrease in their authenticity and competence with particular situations through training and exposure. It can also be compared backwards with snapshots of their levels of authenticity and competence in the same set of situations when they first entered the foreign setting or even before they entered. I explain these possible adaptations of the exercise ahead.

When using the situational framework, I typically begin the class session by introducing the general topic of acculturation and underscoring its importance in a business context (see table 1). I then introduce the term *culture shock* and begin a discussion about what that term means and whether students have experienced culture shock. Following this short discussion, I introduce the U-curve approach for assessing acculturation, explaining the three different stages of the model, including culture shock, and facilitate a discussion about whether students’ own personal experiences fit the predicted U-curve pattern. This discussion about culture shock and the U-curve approach typically takes about 10 minutes, although it can be increased or decreased depending on instructor preference and student interest.

Many international students in my courses have already heard of the U-curve approach, and they are relieved to discover that others apart from themselves have experiences that do not fit the predicted sequential pattern of a honeymoon period, followed by culture shock, and a recovery period. Depending on the time allotted to a given class session, I sometimes also incorporate a discussion about Berry’s dual identification model as an alternative perspective for capturing acculturation at a global level. However,

Table 1
Summary of Exercise Activities

Topic Covered	Activity	Recommended Time
Introduction to acculturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-led discussion of acculturation, culture shock, and U-curve and dual identification approaches 	10 minutes
Introduction to situational approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-led introduction to situational approach • Display 2 × 2 framework • Explain and illustrate competence and authenticity • Illustrate each quadrant with example 	10 minutes
Presentation of situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce list of situations for students to construct personalized situational profiles • Invite suggestions for additional situations 	5 to 10 minutes
Creation of situational profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each student creates two situational profiles using list of situations (one for new culture, one for native culture) • Students create profiles by assigning each situation to one of four quadrants 	10 to 15 minutes
Interactive group exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In small groups, students discuss experience of being in each of four quadrants • Groups devise original name for each quadrant • Groups discuss main challenges of each quadrant 	15 minutes
Feedback to class; Summary discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups share learning with rest of class • Instructor-facilitated discussion about challenges and opportunities of situational approach 	15 to 20 minutes

I typically focus on the U-curve as the main point of reference, because it is a framework students are already often familiar with, and because it presents a clear contrast with the situational model.

It is at this point in the session, after having introduced the notion of culture shock and one or both perspectives, that I introduce the situational framework as an alternative approach for capturing cultural adaptation. To do so, I use an overhead projector to show students a “blank” version of the 2 × 2 diagram to explain the logic of the approach. I explain what the two core concepts of “competence” and “authenticity” mean, and what it would mean to be high or

low on either dimension. I explain how, at any single point in time in a foreign culture, an individual can experience himself or herself as either competent or incompetent and as either authentic or inauthentic in a given situation. I explain how competence has to do with knowledge of cultural norms and the skill to perform the behavior appropriately and how authenticity has to do with feeling that acting appropriately in the situation requires behavior that conflicts with one's culturally intact values and beliefs.

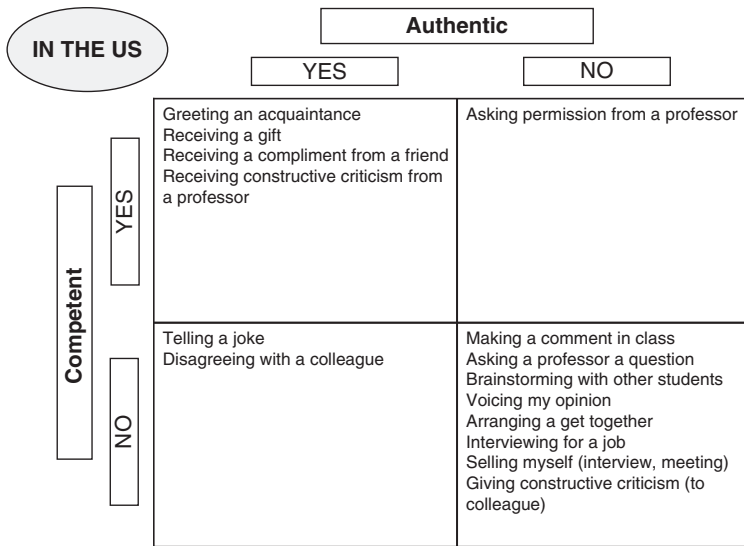
I illustrate the four variations by using the hypothetical example of a foreign MBA student who experiences himself or herself differently in the United States, depending on whether the situation is participating in class, interviewing for a job, giving constructive criticism to a fellow student, or receiving a gift. I emphasize how the assignment of a given situation to a particular quadrant in the model is subjective and personal, based on one's perception of that experience in terms of competence and authenticity at a given point in time. Thus, there is no "correct" or "ideal" solution to the framework.

This introduction typically takes about 10 minutes, after which point I introduce a set of situations that the class will use to construct personalized acculturation portfolios. I use a set of situations that has emerged over several years, based on feedback from students themselves about common, challenging, and important situations that they face in the American business school environment, as well as situations that I have noticed pose competence- and authenticity-based challenges.¹ The set of situations includes social situations, such as greeting an acquaintance and receiving a compliment; academic situations, such as receiving constructive criticism from a professor and making a comment in class; and professional situations, such as interviewing for a job and "selling oneself."

I suggest this set of situations as a "starter" set for the class to use, and I encourage them to add additional situations that are not part of the original list but which pose specific challenges to them. In the past, students have included additional situations such as "promoting oneself during an informal networking event," which I have subsequently added to the overall list. Because students are assessing themselves in potentially vulnerable ways, I make the classroom as safe as possible, emphasizing that the exercise is subjective and personal and that students are not required to share their information with their colleagues.

Following the description and discussion of the situations, which typically takes 5 to 10 minutes, I have students create a blank version of their own personalized version of the 2×2 diagram on a regular-sized piece of notebook paper and array the different situations into quadrants that make sense to them based on their own subjective experience of these situations.

Figure 2
Acculturation Assessment Framework
for Taiwanese MBA Student in the United States

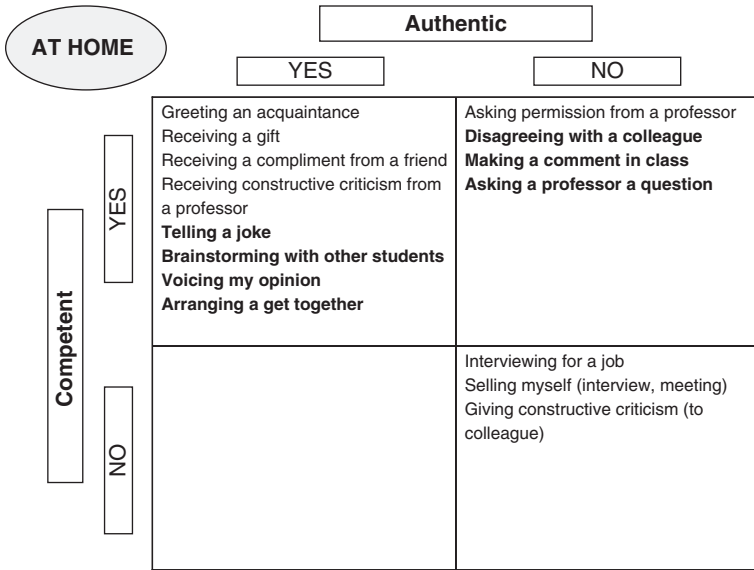


In the past, I have also experimented with having students complete these exercises ahead of time as a homework assignment. A benefit of assigning the exercise ahead of time is that it conserves limited classroom time for discussion rather than for filling out the framework. However, when completing the task outside of class, students are less able to ask clarifying questions about the framework and about the meanings of authenticity and competence. Such questions could, of course, be handled over e-mail; however, the very act of e-mailing a professor a question is, for some students, a difficult situation falling into Quadrants 2, 3, or 4. Thus, I tend to include the exercise as an in-class activity, where I can explicitly encourage clarifying questions from students who might not otherwise ask them.

The 2 × 2 diagram shown in Figure 2, from a 25-year-old female MBA student in the United States from Taiwan, illustrates the nature of the exercise.

As can be seen in Figure 2, generalized frameworks for capturing acculturation, such as the U-curve, would have missed important variability in this student’s cross-cultural experience. When greeting an acquaintance, receiving a gift, receiving a compliment from a friend, or receiving constructive criticism from a professor, the student felt both authentic and

Figure 3
Acculturation Assessment Framework
for Taiwanese MBA Student in Taiwan



competent. Behaving in these situations in the United States was natural for her. In contrast, there were several situations she experienced as quite noxious, as she possessed neither the skills nor the authenticity level to behave naturally and easily. These difficult situations included making a comment in class, asking the professor a question, and brainstorming with other students. Two themes clearly revealed themselves here about her challenges in adapting to the university culture of the United States: voicing her opinion and interacting with authority figures. Finally, in three other types of situations, the student experienced herself as either both competent and inauthentic (asking permission from a professor) or both authentic and incompetent (telling a joke and disagreeing with a colleague).

After having students fill out their acculturation portfolio for the 15 situations in the new culture (the United States), students next fill out a new 2 × 2 portfolio for themselves in terms of how they would experience these same situations *in their native culture*. Figure 3 shows the same Taiwanese student’s allocation of the 15 situations as she experienced them in Taiwan. The situations in bold are the ones that changed places from the original 2 × 2 diagram of her experiences in the United States.

Comparing the 2×2 diagram of situations in the native culture (Figure 3) with a diagram capturing the same situations in the new culture lends insight into the distinctive effect of culture versus the power and difficulty of a particular situation, above and beyond any cultural influence. For example, interviewing for a job, selling herself (in an interview or in a meeting), and giving constructive criticism to a colleague are situations that are noxious for this person (inauthentic and incompetent) both at home *and* in the United States. Thus, the difficulties she faces in these situations can likely be attributed to her own personal psychological makeup and competencies rather than to cultural influences *per se*. Other situations, such as brainstorming with other students, voicing her opinion, and arranging a get-together, suggest strong cultural differences. These situations are noxious in the United States (inauthentic and incompetent) but natural and easy at home (authentic and competent).

After students have completed their personal acculturation portfolios, I conduct a short group exercise to help students reflect on the experience of being in each of the four quadrants, without having to reveal potentially embarrassing or uncomfortable personal details. I typically arrange students into their preexisting project groups of 4 to 5 students, which have already been determined earlier in the semester for work on a different final course project. In this way, the students are already familiar and comfortable with each other. However, I have also run the exercise by randomly assigning students into groups for this portion of the exercise and it has worked quite well.

The specific instructions for the group exercise are as follows:

1. Discuss what it feels like to be in each of the four quadrants of the 2×2 diagram.
2. Create a unique name for each of these quadrants (e.g., “Comfort Zone” for Quadrant 1).
3. Discuss the main challenges of being in each quadrant, and how these challenges might be addressed.

Students typically have great fun creating names for the four quadrants and typically enjoy sharing their experiences. Naming the quadrants helps make the framework memorable and personally meaningful, and it also provides a comfortable vehicle for discussing acculturation experiences. One recent group used popular movie characters, such as the competent and self-assured James Bond for the high-competence/high-authenticity quadrant; the competent, but conflicted Spiderman for the high-competence/low-authenticity quadrant; the incompetent, but authentic Inspector Gadget

for the low-competence/high-authenticity quadrant; and the incompetent and conflicted Mr. Bean for the low-competence/low-authenticity quadrant. Other groups have used city architecture, the weather, and different local highways to capture the experience people feel in each of the four cells of the framework.

In addition to enabling students to reflect about positive and negative experiences of being in each of the four quadrants, the exercise also facilitates a discussion about educational and training interventions that might help individuals cope with various acculturation challenges. In the past, students have prescribed a variety of different methods for enhancing competence, including role-plays, videos, and lectures about culture and cultural differences. Students also typically have several suggestions for reducing feelings of inauthenticity, including reframing identity-inconsistent behavior in ways that are more in line with their cultural values and beliefs. After groups have discussed these questions for 15 minutes, I facilitate an overall group discussion with the entire class where each group reports its answers to the different questions and reveals its solution for naming the different quadrants.

Benefits of the Situational Approach for Education and Training

By capturing acculturation as it varies in terms of competence and authenticity across situations, the situational approach offers several unique educational benefits for individuals reflecting on their cross-cultural experiences. A Bangladeshi MBA student emphasized how the situational approach helped her appreciate the variability in her experience abroad:

The situational exercise made me more aware of the variability and complexity in my foreign culture experience. Through this exercise I could really identify the real feelings at different situations. It helped me to think about the ways by which I could overcome the difficulties that I had to face.

A Vietnamese MBA student reinforced this student's assessment about the importance of appreciating the heterogeneity in one's acculturative experience:

It definitely made me more aware of the variability and complexity in my foreign culture experience. Before I just *felt* that it was difficult for me to switch behaviors without knowing *why* it was difficult.

This particular student also remarked on the relative benefits of the situational approach compared to the U-curve model:

The situational approach is more useful to me because it really helps me diagnose the problem, find out the causes of the problem and thus allow me to come up with a solution for the problem while the U-curve approach only gives me very broad general insight into my overall mood across all situations without telling me what the problems or the causes of the problems are . . . Let's pick class participation as an example. In Vietnam, students just don't speak up in class. They sit up straight and listen quietly to their professor while taking notes carefully. They'll only speak up when their professor asks them to. So for me, it just didn't feel right to participate in class because it goes against the norms in Vietnam and I simply didn't know how to participate properly. By identifying the cause of the problem, I was able to come up with some solutions that really helped me switch my participating behavior.

Students also reported that the situational framework provided a more "personalized" tool compared with the U-curve model, which, to them, felt more generic and tended to force students' experiences into a single trajectory. A Turkish MBA student described how "the U-curve does not suit me. I did not have a honeymoon or any depression period; mine is a horizontal line." An Albanian MBA student described how the situational framework more accurately captured his experience and did not force him to fit his experience to the predicted U-curve model:

We can use the situational model to evaluate present and future experiences by considering different situations in relation to our own values, strengths and weaknesses instead of following a given chart which forces us to be happy, shocked and then recovered.

Finally, a Chinese MBA student explained the differences between the two frameworks in similar terms:

In my opinion, the U-curve model is static while the situational approach is more dynamic and interactive. The former assumes that cross-culture experience is a natural process consisting of a series of stages. The latter, however, captures the complexity of the experience. From my experience, the situational approach better describes my cross culture experience, which fluctuates widely (across situations).

In addition to its educational benefits, the situational approach also has important implications for training. The framework can help by isolating

the source of challenges a person experiences in a particular situation—or a set of situations—abroad, information which can then be used as a guide for enhancing the effectiveness of training intervention. As suggested by the framework, in some situations, the challenge is skill based, and the solution is cultural knowledge and practice; in other situations, the challenge is identity and values based, and the prescription is one of coping rather than cultural learning.

For Quadrant 2 types of situations, for example, where individuals feel confident at executing the new behavior but uncomfortable from an authenticity perspective, training can focus on achieving a greater fit between the new behavior and the person's values and identity. In these cases, individuals might be encouraged to craft "provisional selves" (Ibarra, 1999) or to customize their identity (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) in a way that incorporates the new behavior into their existing system of values. For example, the Taiwanese student in our original example might be encouraged to reframe the meaning of behavior such as asking a professor a question so that the behavior is consistent with, rather than in conflict with, her core cultural values. In this case, asking the professor a question might be understood as conforming to the wishes and expectations of the professor, which might correspond with the student's intact cultural values around relationships with authority figures (Javidan & House, 2001). Although the behavior might still be uncomfortable to perform, reframing it to be congruent with an existing cultural value might reduce discomfort and make it easier for her to enact.

Furthermore, individuals may also be trained to enact different "emotion-focused" coping skills (Gross, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) for minimizing the distress associated with acting in an identity-inconsistent manner. These skills might include focusing attention on the mechanics of making a comment in class, such as the way one phrases a comment or the way one raises one's hand, as opposed to focusing on the meaning of participation; that is, how it feels, from an identity and values standpoint, to actively participate in a classroom discussion. Such a "lower level" focus (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) might distract an individual from the "higher level" meaning of one's actions, namely, that the act of voicing one's opinion in class conflicts with culturally ingrained values and beliefs.

In Quadrant 3 situations, in which the challenge is competence rather than authenticity, an individual would benefit from skills-based rather than meaning- and values-based interventions. One route for increasing competence is to increase an individual's knowledge of the norms for appropriate behavior in that situation and his or her skill at performing the required

behaviors. A long line of research on intercultural training has identified various ways to increase an individual's cultural competence (for recent reviews, see Earley & Peterson, 2004; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004), including increasing cognitive awareness of the rules for appropriate behavior and providing opportunities for intensive practice and modeling of the new behaviors with cultural experts (Black & Mendenhall, 1989).

In addition to providing individuals with knowledge and opportunities to practice new cultural skills, interventions targeted at the competence dimension of acculturation might also involve developing emotion-focused coping skills for minimizing performance anxiety resulting from threats to self-efficacy. As an illustrative example from a different domain of research, Stevens and Gist (1997), in their work on self-efficacy training with students learning to negotiate, found that training people to approach these difficult, new skills with a "mastery" orientation, where the goal is learning rather than a "performance" orientation, decreased anxiety and increased individuals' effort and outcomes (Stevens & Gist, 1997). Such skills-based interventions would, of course, be less useful when the student already possesses competence, but struggles with authenticity (Quadrant 2 situations).

Of course, sometimes the challenge an individual faces is both one of authenticity and one of competence (Quadrant 4 situations). In these particularly challenging situations, training would be targeted at both elements. Trainers would deploy identity-focused training interventions alongside competence-based interventions. These would likely be the most difficult situations the person encounters in the new culture and, absent effective training interventions, are those the person is most likely to avoid altogether. Finally, Quadrant 1 situations, in which an individual feels both authentic and competent, would likely entail no training intervention at all. In fact, individuals might be encouraged to leverage positive feelings from these situations as a buffer against negative feelings in other situations.

As a summary of our discussion, Figure 4 presents a contingency approach for describing the types of interventions that would be most useful in the different types of situations that comprise a nonnative's acculturative experience for the nonnative to become more authentic and competent in that situation over time. Of course, the placement of a given situation on a person's 2×2 acculturation profile may change over time through exposure and experience in the foreign setting. What was once a low-authenticity/low-competence situation could become, over time, a situation in which the person feels more competent and/or authentic. Training needs would therefore change accordingly.

In addition to its implications for designing training interventions, the situational approach also offers nonnatives and trainers a flexible tool for

Figure 4
Contingency Framework for Situation
Types and Suggested Interventions

		Authenticity	
		High	Low
Competence	High	Experience: Easy and Natural <u>Suggested Intervention:</u> None (but can leverage positive feeling from these situations as a buffer against negative feelings in other situations)	Experience: Easy, but unnatural <u>Suggested Intervention:</u> Cognitive reframing Coping
	Low	Experience: Difficult, but natural <u>Suggested Intervention:</u> Skills training Coping	Experience: Difficult and Unnatural <u>Suggested Intervention:</u> Skills training Cognitive reframing Coping

understanding acculturation that allows both “backward” and “forward” insight (Weick, 1979) into the challenges of acculturation. In “forward” insight, people can assess their progress over time. A person might fill out the 2 × 2 diagram for the same situations at Time 1 in a new culture (say, 2 weeks, or the very beginning of the semester), and then again at Time 2 (the midpoint), Time 3 (the end of the semester), and beyond. Like stop-motion photography, the 2 × 2 diagrams portrayed one after another over time for the same situations can lend insight into sources of efficacy and agency (where people have overcome cultural difficulties) as well as persistent sources of difficulty (situations that remain in the inauthentic and/or incompetent quadrants over time).

“Backward” insight means that people can use the framework to help them understand whether it is the characteristics of the foreign cultural setting in particular (as opposed to how they would react to the same situation in their native culture) that might make them feel (in)authentic and/or

(in)competent in a particular situation. Using this method of “backward” insight, the nonnative (and trainer or teacher) can gain further insight into the sources of cultural difficulty for the nonnative in the present, foreign circumstances. If, for example, the person feels incompetent and inauthentic in a situation in the United States and also feels similarly uncomfortable and incompetent in that exact same situation at home, the reasons for the difficulties may be attributed more to the inherent difficulty of the situation for that person than to cultural differences.

An additional benefit of the situational approach is that it can work well alongside a stage approach, such as the U-curve or Sanchez, Spector, and Cooper’s (2000) recent stage model of expatriate adaptation, as a tool to capture individuals’ ongoing levels of authenticity and competence as they progress through the stages of acculturation. For example, during particular predicted stages in a person’s foreign experience, such as the honeymoon period or the culture shock period, the current approach can help people identify specific situations in which their experience is similar to what one might expect during that particular phase of the process (e.g., inauthenticity and incompetence in the culture shock stage) and also situations that are inconsistent with the overall prediction (e.g., authenticity and competence during the cultural shock stage). This can give people a more nuanced and balanced understanding of their acculturative experience rather than a blunt label such as “culture shock” that fails to capture the full range of experience. The situational approach can also be a useful complement to frameworks that assess cross-cultural competence, such as Earley and Ang’s (2003) construct of cultural intelligence, offering individuals a glimpse into their profile of cultural intelligence as it varies across situations, which in turn can help individuals accurately assess their overall or meta-competence (Earley & Peterson, 2004).

Finally, although this approach was developed as a framework for helping foreign business students in the United States make sense of their experience acculturating to a new national culture, the approach has applications for other types of cultural boundary crossings. An R&D manager adapting to the culture of the finance department, a rural physician collaborating with city doctors, and an intelligence agent from the FBI working in tandem with professionals from other intelligence branches all must cross cultural boundaries and engage in behaviors that are unfamiliar and/or potentially uncomfortable from a values- and competence-based perspective. The situational approach can be used in these cases to help individuals appreciate the range of authenticity- and competence-based challenges that

they face. The approach can also be used with college students learning to cross “regional” boundaries within the United States or even with nontraditional college students learning to reacclimate to the university setting after having raised a family. The approach is flexible enough to be used in all these cases to deepen individuals’ awareness of complexity and variability in the cultural adaptation process.

Pedagogical Issues in the Use of the Situational Approach

Despite its benefits, there are some important limitations and challenges in using the situational approach as an acculturation assessment tool. Although the situational framework is more detailed and specific than general approaches to acculturation such as the U-curve, it still, for some students, does not provide enough specificity and detail to capture the challenges that they face in their experiences abroad. For example, some students had difficulties assigning certain situations to a single quadrant because different elements of that same situation could conceivably belong in different quadrants. For example, when assigning the situation “interviewing for a job” to a particular quadrant, some students felt that the act of “making small talk,” which is part of the interviewing ritual in the United States, belonged in a different quadrant from “answering questions about one’s strengths and weaknesses as a worker,” even though both components are part of the same overall situation of the interview. In this case, individuals were encouraged to separate the situation into smaller components if each component had distinct competence- and authenticity-based challenges.

There may also be a self-report bias in having nonnatives make assessments of their own levels of competence and authenticity in a foreign culture. People who are unskilled in a particular domain are often inaccurate about their levels of competence (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Their judgments of their own competence may be biased by recent experiences in a particular situation, even if the recent experience is different from the normative experience in that same situation: for example, a recent positive experience of participating in a classroom discussion might lead a nonnative to report feeling more competent and authentic in that situation.

Another source of bias may be cultural knowledge. As individuals have more experiences with a particular situation in a new culture, they may become more competent and feel more competent, but they may also

become more competent and feel *less* competent. Why? As people learn more about the culture and the rules for behavior in the situation, their original feelings of competence in the situation may dissipate as they see their faux pas in a clearer light and recognize how much they do not know and how incompetent they actually are. In learning that their prior view of themselves was inaccurate, they readjust their feelings of competence and therefore display a pattern of reducing levels of perceived competence even as their actual level of competence is increasing.

Finally, individuals may also display bias because they are unable to diagnose the reasons for particular emotions they feel. An individual may feel “bad” in a particular situation in a new culture but not be able to diagnose the reasons: whether these “bad” feelings result from feelings of incompetence or feelings of discomfort from an identity and values perspective.

How can these limitations be addressed? First, individuals can be encouraged to connect with more experienced peers from their native cultures who have already had some experience acculturating. Talking with peers, or with a cross-cultural counselor or coach, might be useful for individuals to better understand the sources of their discomfort. These individuals might also, particularly in the competence domain, help nonnatives get a more accurate assessment of their actual competence, which might result in feelings of competence or incompetence that correspond to these actual levels/external perceptions. Furthermore, the very act of filling out the 2×2 diagram with an experienced facilitator or coach can itself be a useful intervention to help individuals gain greater insight into their experience in the targeted situations and facilitate their ability to make sober, accurate self-assessments of their experiences.

Concluding Thoughts

Although the experience of cultural adaptation occurs within discrete situations and also varies across these situations, existing frameworks for understanding cultural adaptation do not take this situational variability into account. The situational perspective on cultural adaptation explained and illustrated here enables individuals, trainers, and educators to elucidate the nuanced and variable nature of cross-cultural adjustment and, in doing so, create more targeted educational and training interventions that can influence cross-cultural effectiveness.

Note

1. The situations that I have used, illustrated in the text and in Figures 2 and 3, are particular to the specific context of the North American business school environment. In different cultural contexts and with different students, the list of common, challenging, and important situations will undoubtedly change.

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