

The Freak-out Factor

NOTE: this version of “The Freak-out Factor” is in draft form and some of these examples may not be applicable for your use. I recommend that you adapt the scenarios for your own teaching context, adding some you might find more helpful and taking out some your group might find difficult or which may cause offence even to discuss. The examples given largely express differences between British and Asian cultures, so will need to be expanded to include other examples from other parts of the world.

One way of describing “culture” is what is ‘normal’ for a group of people – their habits, values, ways of talking and modes of operation in everyday tasks, most of which are done without much thought as to “this is the way we do things in my culture”. It is, quite simply, *normal*. But when our ‘normal’ bumps up against someone else’s ‘normal’, it usually causes some reaction, anything from mild surprise, interest, to revulsion and horror. It’s called *culture shock*, and can be severe in some cases.

But if we can understand *why* people do what they do (or rather, why they do it differently from me), then we are going to be more able to be less shocked and more able to see some of the factors that make up a culture. There are good people, bad people, nice people and horrible people in every culture, and all cultures need redemption – including our own. But often we find that once we understand why someone does something, it helps to break down unnecessary barriers.

How to play, The Freak-out Factor

Get into small groups of 3-6 people, and take the cards (print and cut these out from pages 3 & 4) and place them face down in the centre. Take it in turns to do the following:

Take a card and read it to the group. It will briefly describe something an international student – or their British friend – would do. Each example is either from a real situation, or is typical of things encountered in international student ministry.

Before commenting on the scenario, each group member gives their honest opinion of how “freaked-out” or shocked they might be if they encountered this in real life, on a scale of 1-5:

- 1 = this is normal *for me*
- 2 = this is not what I do, but it is really no big deal
- 3 = I’m used to this or not shocked by it, but it is not within my comfort zone
- 4 = I don’t like or understand this, but I am not too horrified by it
- 5 = whatttt????!!!!

NOTE: Group members need to take care to respect the feelings of other people in the room. Loud exclamations of horror or disgust may offend.

Then, as a group, discuss why the person in the scenario might have acted like that, and why that might be different from your own culture and others. Try to look *behind* the cultural habit or example to see what factors might have caused it to become ‘normal’ – is it to do with the climate the person comes from? Do other geographical or historical factors come into play? What about

religion? How does this action make sense in one culture, whilst may offend in another? Ask yourselves the question: what do I do that is similar or different and why?

Few of the examples are really shocking, especially to those familiar with crossing cultures, but try to be honest about your initial reaction, or perhaps explain what your first reaction was when you came across it, and how you have worked to understand it.

Peter Teagle, Friends International Oxford 2018

FF Scenario (a)

You visit a Korean family and they welcome you into their home, but it is clear you are expected to remove your shoes and wear the slippers they provide.

FF Scenario (b)

You visit your British friend at her home for coffee, but she has just arrived home herself from walking her dog. She welcomes you in and starts preparing the coffee immediately – though you notice she is still walking around in wellington boots inside the house which are wet from the rain – and the dog is wet, too. She doesn't seem concerned and only takes them off once the coffee is ready and the dog is dried with an old towel.

FF Scenario (c)

On a day trip you are on with a group of international students to a nearby stately home, you notice a wedding taking place at the house. You then realise you have lost two of your East Asian students. Then you spot them – they have 'joined' the wedding celebration, standing very close to the bride's family taking pictures alongside them.

FF Scenario (d)

You invite your international student friends to join your normal family celebrations at Christmas. All the food is on the table and the dinner is about to start when your international guests ask to take photographs of the food first. Your mum is surprised but happy to agree – but when it takes more than a minute or two, starts to get concerned that the food is getting cold.

FF Scenario (e)

You visit your friend in his home country, and are treated to dinner in what is obviously an expensive restaurant. Dish after dish is served of food that you find hard to enjoy, mainly because they seem to consist of animal body parts you wouldn't normally think of eating – braised ducks' heads, sliced pigs' ears, pigs' intestine and goats' throat. Although there was a menu – with English translation – your friend did all the ordering without asking what you would prefer (and now you are struggling with the food).

FF Scenario (f)

Your friend from East Asia comes to stay. You talk until past midnight, but then he asks to shower before bed.

OR

Your British friend comes to stay. He showers in the morning but NOT at night before bed.

FF Scenario (g)

Ghopal is getting married in a few months' time. He has never actually met his bride, though they have Skyped often since his parents made the introduction some weeks ago. He says he is glad his parents made the choice for him because they know him best.

FF Scenario (h)

Sam and Kate are a British couple – both Christians – who are getting married next year. You happen to know that last year Kate was dating Matt for several months and Sam was dating Julie for years before they split up last June. Both have had several relationships before this one and neither seems concerned about it or feels that it detracts from their relationship now.

FF Scenario (i)

Kelvin is studying Real-estate Management. He struggles with some parts of the course because he doesn't know the UK well enough to know, for example, why house prices in Mayfair are so high, or what the 'North-South Divide' is. Nevertheless, he perseveres. You ask him why he chose the course, and he replies, "I didn't. I prefer English Literature, but my dad feels the best money is in real-estate, and he needs me to earn enough to get my little brother through university in a few years' time."

FF Scenario (j)

Dorcas carries her laptop or tablet everywhere, and always has Skype on almost all day, every day – during lectures, in her flat, at mealtimes etc. It is linked to her family's home computer at the end of the dining table back in Kuala Lumpur. This goes on all year until she returns at the end of her course.

FF Scenario (k)

An Asian student comes along to church each Sunday, but sits at the back and seems very uninterested in worship or the message. He is reluctant to talk to anyone though is polite when approached. As soon as the service is over he goes out and makes a phone call. Another international student tells you he is calling his mother as he promised to attend church every Sunday while he is away, even though he does not believe at all.