



Culture Shock in the Multicultural Society of Thailand's Southern Border Provinces: A Conceptual and Theoretical Review

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Abstract

This literature review aims to examine and synthesize concepts, theories, and research related to culture shock in the context of the multicultural society of Thailand's southern border provinces, with a specific focus on identifying the structural and social mechanisms that produce culture shock within a conflict-affected multicultural region. This region is characterized by ethnic, religious, linguistic, and lifestyle diversity, as well as complex historical, social, and political dynamics. The study highlights that culture shock in this context does not arise solely from cross-border mobility, but also from the interaction and coexistence of culturally distinct groups within the same geographic area, leading to social and cultural tension, confusion, and adaptation challenges in daily life. Drawing on Oberg's (1960) framework of cross-cultural adaptation, and the Intercultural Competence frameworks of Deardorff (2006) and Bennett (1993), this review analyzes four key characteristics of culture shock in the southern border context: 1) Ethnocentrism, 2) Enculturation processes, 3) Social skill deficits, and 4) Cultural illiteracy. The findings suggest that culture shock here is a continuous process intertwined with identity, power, collective social memory, and structural social factors. The study argues that culture shock in this region should be understood as a structural social issue rather than merely an individual psychological problem. Developing intercultural competence at the individual, community, and institutional levels is crucial for reducing tension, fostering intercultural understanding, and promoting peaceful and sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: Culture Shock, Multicultural Society, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Intercultural Competence, Southern Border Provinces of Thailand

Introduction

The southern border provinces of Thailand consisting of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla Province are not merely geographical areas at the periphery of the national map, but regions of deep historical, social, and cultural significance. This distinction is officially recognized through the Administration Act in the Southern Border Provinces, B.E. 2549 and B.E. 2553 (Government Gazette, 2010), which designates the area



as a special administrative zone requiring tailored measures for development, security, and foundational understanding. The so-called multicultural society of this region, as defined by Jaisuda (2024), extends beyond the mere coexistence of religious communities. It encompasses a complex tapestry of Thai Muslims of Malay descent the majority of the population who maintain Malay (Yawi) language and Islamic tradition as their primary identity, alongside Thai Buddhists and other ethnic and religious groups. This multiculturalism functions as a double-edged reality: a source of rich social capital on one hand, and a site of hidden vulnerability marked by prejudice, stereotyping, and the alienation arising from cultural difference on the other. The prolonged unrest and violence that has continued since 2004, now spanning over two decades, has compounded this complexity. This conflict context has been identified as a key factor in the region's instability, producing not only physical and material harm but also significant consequences for mental health, quality of life, and access to government services (Jitpiromsri et al., 2017). The result is a pervasive social atmosphere described as 'city in fog' characterized by distrust and a sense of alienation from the state and from culturally different others. In this environment, multiculturalism is often interpreted through the lens of insecurity, shaping daily life under conditions of paranoia and limiting opportunities for human development (Buranajaroenkij & Hayes, 2025).

Universities in this region serve as what may be described as a 'microcosm' of this broader multicultural reality, drawing students from diverse regional and cultural backgrounds into a shared learning environment. These institutions present simultaneous opportunities for cross-cultural learning and significant obstacles arising from cultural clashes. When individuals transition from familiar environments to this unfamiliar cultural and security-risk context, they encounter what Oberg (1960) termed 'culture shock' a state of stress, anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty produced by exposure to an unfamiliar culture, language, social norms, and educational system. Such symptoms affect psychological well-being, social integration, and academic performance (Pedersen, 1995; Wang et al., 2007). It is important to note that culture shock in the southern border provinces is qualitatively different from the experience described in conventional cross-cultural adaptation literature. In most contexts, culture shock is understood as an adjustment to a 'new culture.' In this region, however, it involves an adaptation to a 'new culture underlying security risk', a compound challenge that combines cultural unfamiliarity with the psychological burden of living in a conflict zone. This distinction justifies a specialized analytical framework and motivates the present review.



Research Gap and Significance

Despite the extensive literature on culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation (Oberg, 1960; Kim, 2001; Gudykunst, 1995), there is limited scholarly attention to culture shock within conflict-affected multicultural societies where both cultural difference and security risk operate simultaneously as stressors. Existing studies in the southern border provinces tend to focus on specific populations (e.g., nursing students, Muslim undergraduates) without offering a synthesizing conceptual framework that captures the structural dimensions of culture shock in this region. This review addresses that gap by applying and extending established theoretical frameworks — particularly Oberg's culture shock model, Deardorff's intercultural competence framework, and Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory — to the unique conditions of Thailand's southern border provinces.

Research Objectives

1. Analyze and understand the mechanisms, causes, and effects of culture shock on social relationships and lifestyle vulnerability in the multicultural society of Thailand's southern border provinces.
2. Identify key theoretical frameworks applicable to understanding and addressing culture shock within conflict-affected multicultural contexts.

Research Questions

1. What are the key mechanisms through which culture shock manifests in the multicultural society of Thailand's southern border provinces?
2. How do structural factors — including ethnic diversity, religious difference, language barriers, and conflict — contribute to and sustain culture shock in this region?
3. What theoretical frameworks and practical recommendations can guide intercultural competence development for individuals, institutions, and communities in this context?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrates three interrelated theoretical dimensions drawn from cross-cultural psychology, communication studies, and conflict studies:

1. Structural Framework

The southern border provinces are understood not merely as a physical space but as a 'meaningful overlapping space' composed of three critical dimensions: (a) Multicultural



Dimension: the coexistence of linguistic, religious, and traditional diversity (Thai Muslim-Malay identity and Thai Buddhist identity), which constitutes both social capital and a site of tension; (b) Conflict Dimension: over two decades of sustained violence (2004–present) which have generated endemic mistrust and eroded the sense of security; and (c) Change/Movement Dimension: the ongoing influx of students and migrants into this 'microcosm,' bringing cultural difference into direct contact with structural risk.

2. Variable Relationships

The study frames the relationships among phenomena as follows: Initial Variables (Causes) cultural difference (language, religion, lifestyle) and conflict context (violence, paranoia, security risk). Mediating Variable culture shock (stress, confusion, anxiety arising from adaptation to unfamiliar and risky environments). Outcome Variables (Effects) lifestyle vulnerabilities (mental health, quality of life, access to services); quality of cross-cultural relationships (prejudice, stereotyping, alienation, or cultural clash); and academic adaptation.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Three established frameworks are applied and extended: Oberg's (1960) Culture Shock Model, which provides the foundational description of culture shock as a process of anxiety, adjustment, and adaptation; Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Framework, which describes the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for effective cross-cultural interaction; and Gudykunst's (1995) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, which addresses how uncertainty and anxiety mediate intercultural communication. Critically, this study extends these frameworks to a conflict-affected context, arguing that conventional models of culture shock do not fully account for environments in which cultural unfamiliarity is compounded by existential security risk. The three frameworks are presented in Figure 1.

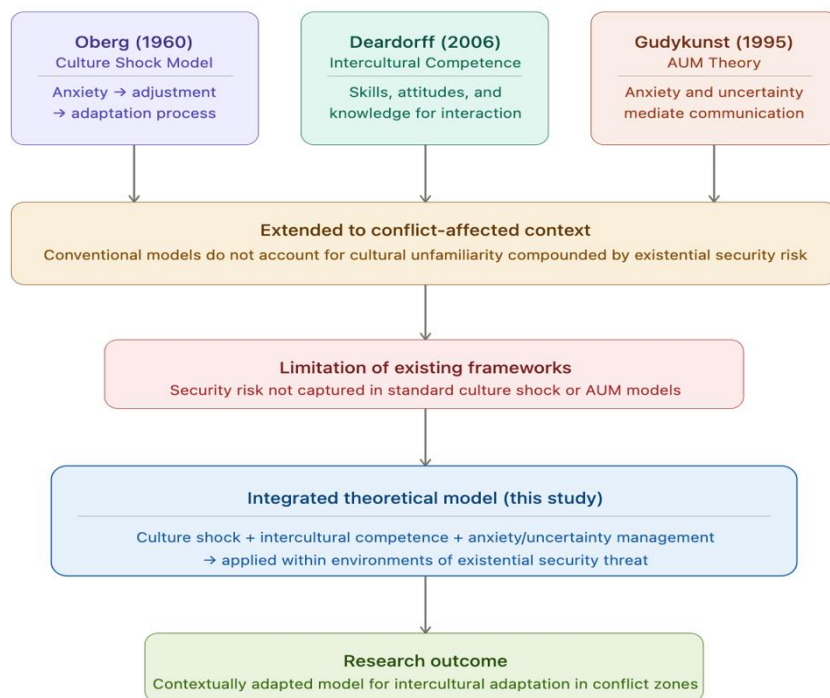


Figure 1: Theoretical Frameworks

Methodology

This study employs documentary research using systematic content analysis. A total of 16 academic sources were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) Relevance to culture shock, cross-cultural adaptation, or intercultural competence; (2) Focus on or applicability to Thailand's southern border provinces or analogous conflict-affected multicultural contexts; (3) Published in peer-reviewed journals, academic conference proceedings, or authoritative academic books; and (4) published between 1960 and 2025 to ensure both theoretical breadth and contemporary relevance. Sources written in Thai were included when they directly addressed the study context. Exclusion criteria included general travel or popular psychology articles and sources lacking academic peer review.

The analytical framework involved thematic synthesis: each source was coded for themes related to causes, manifestations, and outcomes of culture shock, and for recommendations regarding intercultural adaptation. Emergent themes were then organized deductively against the three theoretical frameworks described above, and inductively to identify the four key characteristics of culture shock specific to this context (ethnocentrism, enculturation processes, social skill deficits, and cultural illiteracy).



The 16 selected sources are as follows:

1. Jaruwat Khunram (2020). Social support and self-esteem affecting cultural adaptation among Bachelor of Nursing Program students, Boromarajonani College of Nursing, Yala.
2. Wisdom Thepsing, Khomsan Wongwan, and Abdullah Chelong (2021). Cross-cultural learning through the arts and culture of Muslim youth in the three southern border provinces.
3. Pinapha Hat Yod, Jiraporn Kesepitchayawattana, and Phatchanee Somkang (2020). Cross-cultural adjustment process of foreigners working with Thai people in Thailand.
4. Thai Chaiyaphan and Jirasuk Suksawat (2017). Cultural adaptation affecting feelings of harmony among Muslim undergraduate students of Songkhla Rajabhat University.
5. Yusra Lohmae, Nurdina Romae, and Aizah Yuzo (2021). Factors related to the adaptation of first-year Bachelor of Nursing Science students, Boromarajonani College of Nursing.
6. Srisompop Jitpiromsri (2022). Southern Border/Patani 2004–2021: Stepping into the nineteenth year.
7. Suchira Wichaidit, Thaparath Rakpanusit, and Ubon Wannakit (2022). Healing experience and the operation of psychiatric nurses in three southern border provinces.
8. Abdullah Chelong (2021). Cultural knowledge and citizenship in a multicultural society.
9. Buranajaroenkij, D., & Hayes, M. (2025). The securitization of social reintegration in southern Thailand's armed conflict.
10. Deardorff, D. K. (2006). The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization.
11. Gudykunst, W. B. (1995). Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory: Current status.
12. Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (1992). Intercultural communication theory.
13. Kim, Y. Y. (2001). Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.
14. Matsumoto, D. (2000). Culture and psychology: People around the world (2nd ed.).
15. Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments.
16. Pedersen, P. (1995). The five stages of culture shock: Critical incidents around the world.



Results

The literature review reveals that culture shock in the southern border provinces manifests through four key characteristics, each of which is briefly described below:

1. Ethnocentrism

Several studies (Chelong, 2021; Thepsing et al., 2021) identified tendencies among both local and incoming populations to evaluate other cultural groups through the lens of their own cultural norms. This produces misunderstandings, prejudice, and social friction in daily interactions, particularly within university settings.

2. Enculturation Processes

The process by which individuals absorb the norms and values of their culture of origin was found to function as both a protective resource and a barrier to adaptation. Strong enculturation within Malay-Muslim tradition, for example, can create difficulties for newcomers unfamiliar with Islamic social norms and practices (Chelong, 2021; Jitpiromsri, 2022).

3. Social Skill Deficits

A recurring finding across studies (Lohmae et al., 2021; Khunram, 2020; Chaiyaphan & Suksawat, 2017) was those students from outside the region frequently lacked the communicative and social skills necessary for effective interaction in a culturally distinct and security-sensitive environment. Language barriers (particularly unfamiliarity with Yawi/Malay) and limited knowledge of local customs contributed to isolation and anxiety.

4. Cultural Illiteracy

A lack of foundational knowledge about the region's cultural, historical, and religious context was identified as a significant barrier to adaptation. Students and migrants who arrived without prior exposure to the cultural landscape of the southern border provinces were more likely to experience prolonged culture shock, social alienation, and academic burnout (Hat Yod et al., 2020; Wichaidit et al., 2022).

Together, these four characteristics operate not as isolated individual deficits but as interconnected structural vulnerabilities that are reinforced by the conflict context of the region. The data from the reviewed sources particularly those focusing on nursing students, Muslim undergraduates, and cross-cultural workers consistently indicate that culture shock in the southern border provinces leads to: (a) mental health difficulties including anxiety, depression, and social isolation; (b) reduced academic performance and risk of educational burnout; and (c) deterioration in the quality of cross-cultural relationships, manifesting as increased prejudice, stereotyping, and cultural withdrawal.



Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this review support and extend the theoretical frameworks described above. In terms of Oberg's (1960) culture shock model, the trajectory of stress, confusion, and gradual adjustment is clear in the experiences of students in the southern border provinces. However, the conventional model's assumption that culture shock is a temporary, reversible process requires qualification in this context: the ongoing security risk, persistent intercultural tension, and entrenched structural inequalities mean that culture shock may become a chronic condition rather than a transitional phase.

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework further illuminates this process: students must navigate the tension between maintaining their cultural identity and adapting to a new cultural environment, a balance that is particularly fraught when the new environment carries connotations of danger and exclusion. Pinapa Hat Yod et al. (2020) demonstrated that acculturation follows a staged process requiring psychological flexibility and resilience, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress-coping model. The role of emotional intelligence and social support as protective factors identified across multiple studies (Lohmae et al., 2021; Khunram, 2020) aligns with Gudykunst's (1995) AUM theory, which holds that effective management of anxiety and uncertainty is central to successful intercultural communication. Institutions that actively cultivate these capacities among students are better positioned to facilitate adaptation and reduce the adverse outcomes of culture shock.

Critically, this review argues that the dominant framing of culture shock as an individual psychological problem to be resolved through personal resilience or attitudinal adjustment is insufficient for the southern border context. Culture shock here is produced and sustained by structural conditions: a history of conflict, entrenched ethnic and religious divisions, power asymmetries between the Thai state and Malay-Muslim communities, and institutional frameworks that have historically prioritized security over intercultural understanding (Buranajaroenkij & Hayes, 2025; Jitpiromsri, 2022). Addressing culture shock in this region therefore requires structural as well as individual interventions.

Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of the reviewed literature, three strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. Structural Shift

Universities and government institutions should move from focusing on individual adjustment to actively managing the institutional environment in ways that facilitate diversity and reduce structural barriers to cultural participation. This includes revising



orientation programs, developing culturally responsive curricula, and creating institutional policies that explicitly recognize and affirm cultural pluralism.

2. Deep Intercultural Competence Development

Educational programs should go beyond superficial language or culture orientation to cultivate genuine intercultural competence including critical awareness of power dynamics, historical memory, and identity formation in the southern border context. Drawing on Deardorff's (2006) framework, this involves developing both the affective-motivational (attitudes) and cognitive-behavioral (knowledge and skills) dimensions of intercultural competence.

3. Community-Based Exchange Mechanisms

Shared learning and exchange spaces should be established between local and non-local community members to reduce alienation and build mutual understanding. Such initiatives whether through arts and culture programs (Thepsing et al., 2021), interfaith dialogue, or peer mentorship within universities can serve as practical mechanisms for building intercultural competence from the ground up.

Summary

Cultural adaptation in the multicultural society of Thailand's southern border provinces presents a complex and unique challenge distinct from culture shock as it is conventionally understood in the literature. The co-presence of ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity with the structural consequences of prolonged armed conflict creates conditions in which culture shock is not merely a transitional psychological experience but a persistent, structurally produced phenomenon. This review has identified four key characteristics of culture shock in this context: ethnocentrism, enculturation processes, social skill deficits, and cultural illiteracy, and has argued that these characteristics must be understood as structural rather than purely individual phenomena.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its extension of established culture shock and intercultural competence frameworks to a conflict-affected multicultural context, demonstrating that existing models must be adapted to account for the compounding effects of security risk and structural inequality on cross-cultural adaptation. Practically, the study provides a foundation for evidence-based interventions at the individual, institutional, and community levels, aimed at developing intercultural competence and promoting peaceful coexistence in this region.



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