

Culture shock in the Netherlands

Adapting to a new culture can often be the biggest challenge for expats living in any country. But is the culture in the Netherlands one that encourages acceptance of those from other countries? ELIOT ROLEN talks to experts in the field about culture shock and integration in the Netherlands.

The intermixing of cultures that our globalising world has made the norm should, ideally, allow us to view the members of other cultures as we would a next door neighbour. They may live in a different house with different rules, but you would have no hesitation in inviting them into your home.

The Netherlands has opened its doors more than most to other cultures. The rationale for doing so, in the case of the Dutch East India Company, was for socioeconomic reasons. But recently, attitudes towards the wisdom of that openness have changed.

The question this article poses is: how does an individual deal with culture shock?

Four uniquely qualified experts will give their perspectives on culture shock and will provide invaluable context to the examples provided.

The four are: Catherine Ann Lombard, psychosynthesis coach, writer and teacher, Karin van der Ven, the CEO of Jules & You, Bonnie Weinstein, professor of intercultural communications at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences and Veronique Eurlings, manager of the Knowledge Center for International Staff at Maastricht University.

Let us set the stage by outlining the meaning, process and personal dimensions of "culture shock."

Understanding the concept of culture shock

While there are many definitions of culture shock, Catherine Ann Lombard sees it as a time when, "you are constantly being thrown up against yourself."

This offers you the chance to discover your real identity. But rebuilding identity is a process full of anxiety, so many internationals choose instead to live in a cultural enclave." Her definition is

influenced by Psychosynthesis, the school of psychological thought that Catherine employs in her coaching of international students at Twente University.

When Karin van der Ven was thrown up against her own ideas as to how the world worked, she found it to be an initially frustrating, but eventually humorous thing.

Karin is the CEO of Jules & You and the chair of the "country team" responsible for increasing awareness of Maastricht University in Turkey. That team travels to Turkey a few times a year to meet with Turkish students and encourage them to consider attending Maastricht University.

Karin had become acquainted with Turkey during her time there in the second semester of her master's degree. She experienced culture shock in the form of being frustrated by the lengthy time taken by the Turkish authorities to finalise her immigration paperwork.

She recounts the inner monologue that went through her head at the time: "I caught myself thinking, how backwards is this? They can't even get the paperwork done for this and this and this, it took forever for them to process it and I had no clue why. These procedures worked entirely differently, you need to know someone on the inside to get anything done. Once you know that, it's kind of funny, but when you're in the process you think, how does the society work?"

Her experience with the frustrating differences between her own culture and the one she entered may have reinforced the benefit a helping hand, in the form of a cultural intermediary, might have in preventing similar anxiety.

Jules & You, which she founded shortly after the completion of



Karin van der Ven, CEO Jules & you

her master's degree, accomplished that task, as their most popular services help international professionals and students unsnarl the bureaucratic knots they face in the Netherlands.

Preventing their very occurrence is what Bonnie Weinstein, who teaches intercultural communications, is dedicated towards. In her teachings she emphasises the many ways that cultures can differ, which must be taken into account when interacting with them.

Some of these differences are conceptions of time or the hierarchy or lack thereof within organisations.

Her students benefit greatly from that increased understanding during their time abroad as exchange students and throughout the rest of their lives whenever they interact with someone from a culture other than their own.

For the Netherlands in particular, there is a historical barrier towards members of other cultures getting along with one another.

Catherine Ann Lombard comments that, "Dutch culture is rather ambiguous, because they are

historically a mercantile people so they are used to going out and being in other cultures, but they are not used to cultures being in their own land, that's only a recent phenomenon."

This idea is directly related to the second reaction to culture shock, the creation of a cultural enclave.

Living in a cultural enclave can do one of two things. On one hand, it can serve to add to the cultural diversity of the city, as Little Italy and Chinatown do for New York City; those are cultural enclaves that open the minds of the people living in the greater area while preserving that cultural group's unique identity and values.

On the other hand, there are enclaves that are inaccessible to those that don't share the cultural values of the people living in them.

One such bastion that has accrued a negative reputation is Slotervaart, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Amsterdam inhabited 45,000 people, most of whom are immigrants from North Africa and the former Dutch colonies.

The attention of the country was placed on it in 2004 when a local resident, Mohammed Bouyeri, murdered controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh and again, in 2007, when riots broke out over the shooting of a Muslim youth by police.

"Gedogen" catalysed refers to turning a blind eye towards things that are not officially allowed, but are tolerated. The unrest in Slotervaart almost single handedly ended its use.

Soon after the 2007 shooting, then-Prime Minister Balkenende announced that he was making it his mission to curb, "suburban lawlessness and hate mongering."

Those policies and their effective implementation by Slotervaart's mayor, Ahmed Marcouch catalysed the significant decrease of unrest in Slotervaart.

But intolerance towards immigrants was becoming more pronounced.

One of the more concrete examples of this was in Limburg's support of the immigration-opposed PVV (Partij Voor Vrijheid, or Freedom Party) in the April



Catherine Ann Lombard, psychosynthesis coach, writer and teacher



Polish demonstration against Geert Wilders, The Hague, 2012

Photo: Pascal Maramis

2012 parliamentary elections. Geert Wilders, the PVV's leader and founder, is well known for being openly opposed to multiculturalism; a film that he directed, "Fitna" (2008), exemplifies that resistance to an extreme degree.

The film fuses violent imagery with cited quotes from the Koran that, when combined, imply that Islam is an innately violent religion.

But do these negative examples reflect upon the overall openness of the Dutch to internationals?

Capitalising on cultural capital to become a Capital of Culture in 2018

In the first century AD, the Roman Empire was at the apex of its power and influence. On the Northwestern edge of its mammoth expanse lay a little bridge that connected the trading cities of Bayav and Cologne.

This bridge, and the small settlement around it, was named Trajectum ad Mosam, known to-

day as Maastricht. While the Roman Empire eventually collapsed, Maastricht gained a strong reputation for trade and mining, and was an important pilgrimage site to the resting place of Saint Servatius.

What was in constant flux was its national allegiance.

The French, Spanish and the Belgians laid claim to the city at one point or another, and it was one of the last cities to become a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1839.

Its multicultural history and geographic proximity to Belgium and Germany made Maastricht a fitting place for the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 that created the European Union.

Many internationals have come to study and work there. Forty-three percent of its student population comes from outside of the Netherlands, 106 international institutions have offices there and it hosts numerous events of global repute including The European Fine Arts Fair and the European

Model United Nations.

Maastricht, in collaboration with the Euregion, is now on the path towards becoming the European Capital of Culture in 2018.

That title, which is currently held by Marseille, France and Košice, Slovakia, is given annually to the city or cities that the selection committee believes best represent both the diversity and similarities between European cultures.

This would not be the first time a Dutch city would hold that title, as Amsterdam and Rotterdam held the title in 1987 and 2001 respectively, but now the town that gave birth to the EU and the euro hopes that its time is just around the corner, but is it a vain hope?

As far as intercultural presence is concerned, it is obvious why both Rotterdam and Amsterdam were chosen; Amsterdam for its cultural tourism and the presence of one of the largest ports in the world in Rotterdam ensured the exemplification of the needed qualifications for Capital of Culture.

Like Rotterdam, Maastricht came into existence as a trading post first and belonged to every dominant European culture since the Roman Empire.

Currently, it has a large international student population, many international institutions and events, but only two of the four people interviewed for this article believe that Maastricht is eligible for the title.

Catherine Ann Lombard believes that, like Twente, Maastricht was surrounded by many cultures, but its provincial mentality has created a defensive paradigm within the minds of its population that present resistance towards the acceptance of other cultures in their midst.

Bonnie Weinstein, raised in a Jewish, English-speaking family in Christian, French speaking Montreal has a very personal understanding of how cultures can leave their mark on each other without denigrating the other.

She found that, in teaching Intercultural Communications to both Dutch and international students at the Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, there was a tendency on the part of some Dutch students who go on academic

exchange to return to the Netherlands and comment on how they felt everything in that foreign country to be wrong, or "backwards."

They also live in parallel with one another in certain social contexts. The student associations that are an integral part of Maastricht's student life are not completely open to international students and, furthermore, many Dutch students return home on the weekend, which leaves little time for adequate socialisation to occur.

But a lack of socialisation is a two way street.

The most active part of Jules & You's customer base are international students. Of those international students, the largest proportionate nationality is German.

They look to Jules & You as an invaluable resource to find a place to live, a bike, or affordable accommodation, but provoking interest in the Netherlands is difficult.

Karin explains, "I wonder whether the Germans actually integrate, because when they come here what they find here is little Germany, so they have German friends, German food, German parties..."

This is yet more evidence of a cultural enclave, although a more subtle one than Slotervaart, potentially growing within Maastricht, and it has the potential to be greatly detrimental to the cultural growth of the city and the region.

The Knowledge Center for International Staff (KCIS) at Maastricht is responsible for managing the care of employees hired by the University from outside of the country.

It also organises monthly social gatherings called "Meet & Greet" to allow expats and locals to meet each other in a relaxed setting.

According to Veronique Eurlings, its manager, KCIS started organising these "Meet & Greet" in early 2011 as a reaction to the lack of socialisation occurring between Dutch and International employees.

In her view, it was caused by the presence of a deeply entrenched Dutch cultural value.

Dutch people aim to maintain a distinct separation between professional and private life. They

form interpersonal relationships outside of work, in their local communities.

But for an international staff member or student, that community is the other employees they are working or studying with, whether they share a nationality or not.

For international staff and students that want to study, work and live in Maastricht, the social aspects to their integration and homemaking are not the first blips to cross their radar screen.

These first experiences take the form of receiving a residency permit, finding a home and paying their taxes, processes which are not as transparent as they need to be.

The very existence of KCIS and Jules & You implies that an international employee or student would be at an extreme disadvantage if they attempted to take care of everything by themselves, but Veronique is hopeful.

"The Gemeente is starting to be aware that there are lots of internationals living in their community and are trying to improve their services," she says.

One key way is that they are now slowly but surely making all information available in both Dutch and English.

Conclusion: let us be shocked no more

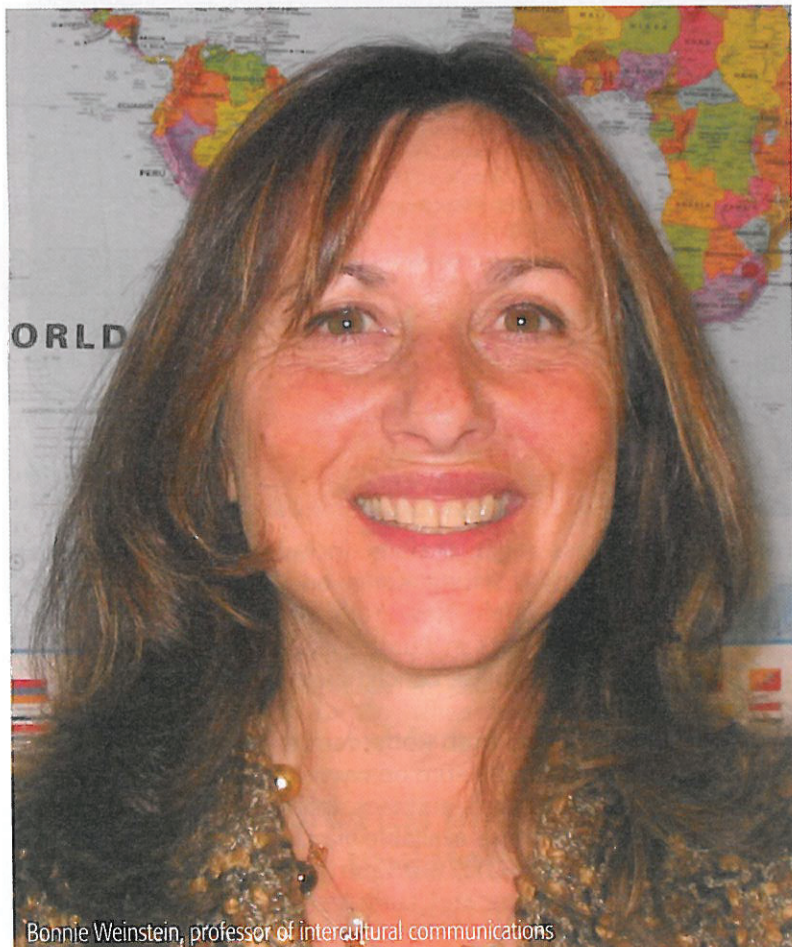
Catherine Ann Lombard is also a proponent of the six-stage theory of cultural sensitivity created by the founder of the Intercultural Institute, Dr. Milton Bennett.

The six stages are: denial, defense, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration.

Each of the stages on the "Bennett" scale can logically be looked at as being chronologically determined, meaning that the longer a person is living in the foreign culture the further along on the scale they go.

But that would oversimplify things, as the incidents of cultural disharmony mentioned previously fall very squarely on defence, the second stage.

The sixth stage, full integration, can and must become a reality if the Netherlands is to reach its full potential as a global engine for bettering intercultural relations.



Bonnie Weinstein, professor of intercultural communications