

Re-entry shock: Torn between two cultures

by Martha Denney and Erin Eckert

Tong is a man in his mid-20s. Born and bred in Thailand, he had a chance of coming to the United States to take up a bachelor's degree in engineering. The thrill and anticipation of attending a university and visiting a new and exciting country almost overwhelmed him.

He never gave the problem of "going home" a thought. He found it tough settling into the American system at first, but he gradually fit in and enjoyed his stay. That was five years ago. He is still studying in the U.S. today despite many summer trips home. He was totally unprepared for the shock that awaited him the first time he returned. Tong says, "I felt out of place. I could not understand it. I felt uncomfortable." So he returned to the U.S. to take his masters. He continued to take summer vacations at home; but the problem persisted. He is now back in the U.S. for his PhD and his yo-yo existence prevails.

"The longer you stay away, the more difficult the re-entry problem become," he says. "I feel more comfortable here. Groups of friends back home have changed and it is hard to fit back into parental and communal direction."

Tong is one of many international students who face the re-entry problem.

Think back to your first week in the United States. Do you remember excitement and fascination; anxiety or loneliness? Sooner or later virtually all student sojourners (those who live abroad temporarily) experience euphoria and depression as a part of the cultural adjustment process.

This process is a pattern of change that most go through to some degree or other. It is characterized by emotional highs and lows that seem to come in a predictable order. There is the excitement of arriving in a new country, the initial elation of seeing new things, and a gradual settling-in period into a familiar routine. The next phase tends to be a slump during which students tire of relating to their new environment on a superficial level and experience "culture shock." After a time they begin to adapt to their host culture and gain a more measured view of how that culture works in relation to their own.

As they prepare to return home, the cycle of highs and lows continues. Many people report feeling excited but anxious about going home. At first they say they feel happy being at home, but experience a let-down after several weeks that may be even more dramatic than the one they survived while abroad. Eventually they readjust to their home culture and find that as a result of their travels they have a broader and more global view of the world.

Frenchman Bruno Grawitz has been through the process. He came to the United States just 18 months ago to take up a civil engineering degree. He went back home to Marseilles after completing his program. "I had no difficulties in terms of readjusting socially; but I was surprised to find many changes had taken place in France while I was away, especially on the political front," Grawitz says. France had become considerably more conservative, and this he found difficult to accept.

Researchers have found that even though periods of adjustment and readjustment may be uncomfortable, this

process is beneficial. Noted cross-culture researcher Richard Brislin has found that there are essentially no long-lasting negative results from a cross-culture experience; rather the research reported many positive outcomes. The benefits ranged from increased creativity and world-mindedness to a greater political sensitivity within organizations.

Our expectations, or how we visualize new experiences before they happen, can be both positive and negative. We sometimes imagine things that are close to reality, but as often as not we imagine things that are far from it. Expectations are positive when they help us prepare for change, but they can also rob us of our flexibility and sense of adventure if we become too heavily invested in how we think things ought to be.

Preparing to go home is much like moving to a new culture...it is a time of excitement and apprehension. Because of that it is important to give yourself time to think through what you may encounter. Re-entry adjustment, the term used to describe the period of adjustment that occurs when you return home after living abroad, is predictable and normal. But is isn't always easy.

Javed Ahmed knows that! He left Pakistan to study in the United States and he has had problems re-adjusting to the re-entry trauma. Javed says, "The biggest problem I found was a lack of appropriate equipment and technology, and resistance from colleagues and supervisors to adopt ideas that I had learned in the U.S. Nobody wants change. This hindered my re-entry program and I advise foreign students in the U.S. not to daydream about future accomplishments." Return, and try to do the best you can under the existing conditions, and don't miss the opportunity, if you get the chance, to improve the system, he added.

Then there was the Scotsman who thought he did not belong to either culture and felt a foreigner in both places. So he created his own—a third—culture.

What can you do to prepare for re-entry?

It doesn't seem logical at first glance. After all, home is home. You speak the language, you know the people, your family eagerly awaits your return, and you've been telling everyone in your lab how anxious you are to get home. But, if you take time to think about it, you will begin to realize that your expectations of returning home may not be quite in line with reality.

According to many foreign students the greatest blockade to reintegration happens in the workplace. A Tunisian geologist said, "I found that people in the U.S. are motivated to work. In my country they work to live. American scientists are willing to exchange facts and information about their work. In Tunisia workers are suspicious of one another, there is a lack of mutual respect and cooperation, and they don't want change. This can be difficult for the foreign student going home."

Some people preparing to head home take the pessimistic approach. They are unrealistically negative...they won't ever be able to adjust, they know they won't find a job, they are sure that none of their

friends will be there. It seems the reality is probably somewhere between the two points of views. There will be joys and there will be struggles.

So, you ask, “if it is normal and predictable to experience a period of adjustment, why worry about it?” The answer is because, in this case, worrying is healthy! Middle-Easterners, for example, constantly worry about body language and speech patterns they have adopted while they were away. How are they to present themselves, say in Iran?

Anticipation of stressful events and specific difficulties can help a person rehearse for the actual situations, should they arise. The expression “forewarned is forearmed” seems to apply here. If you anticipate difficulties, they will not take you by surprise. Taking time to think through possible coping strategies will help you respond more effectively when the time comes.

Your preparation for returning home should ideally begin on your first day in the United States. That does not mean you should remain a visitor during your entire stay abroad, but it does mean taking responsibility for actively shaping your experiences to meet your personal and professional goals.

Although your short-term goal may be to complete your degrees, your long-term goals are probably much broader. Preparing yourself to go home and applying your education in an environment quite different from the U.S. means taking an active role in your education from the day you arrive.

Nancy Adler conducted research in 1981 on Americans and Canadians returning home after several years abroad and found a matrix into which most returning sojourners fall. The matrix is defined by two dimensions: optimism or pessimism and passivity or activity.

The four types of coping styles defined by the scheme (below right) are resocialized, alienated, rebellious and proactive. They are described by Jacque Behrens in her book on *Looking Forward, Looking Backward* (1986) as follows:

- The resocialized students wholly readjust to their home culture rather than incorporate the experiences from their travels abroad. They remove themselves from their foreign experience.
- The alienated person rejects the home environment and consequently fails to continue to grow from the foreign experience.
- The rebellious type reacts to the home environment by trying to control it and change it in unrealistic ways.
- The proactive individual is one who grows from the foreign experience even after returning home and maximizes learning.

Some factors in the design and execution of your program means you cannot change or control them. So you must focus on those things you can control. There are several tactics you can use, but the first and most important is good planning. Your program will simply happen to you in a helter-skelter way if you don’t assert yourself.

1. Get organized. Keep a calendar with important dates. Schedule time out for exercise, activities unrelated to academics, and for cooking and eating healthy foods.

2. Examine your values. Think about your personal values and the values of your home and host cultures. Living abroad provides a rare opportunity to see and understand your culture from a different perspective. Be sure to say “yes” to requests to speak to community groups and schools about your home country. Activities that help

you understand your host culture will also help you understand your home culture better, and those insights can be very helpful when you return home.

3. Identify your goals...both long-term and short-term, and write them down. Put them in a place where you will see them—on the bathroom mirror, your desk or on the refrigerator. Research has shown that you are much more likely to reach your goals if you have articulated them and remind yourself of them on a regular basis.

4. Communicate with your family and colleagues at home! Many students forget that staying in touch with their friends back home is critical, both for maintaining useful contacts and to remind you of changes that are happening when you are away.

5. Think about your expectations. What benefits do you expect to gain from the completion of your program; what do you expect will happen when you return home? Discard unrealistic expectations and try to formulate those that recognize some of the ups and downs experienced by most people when they make major life changes.

Talk to others who have been through the process before. How did they feel when they went home? What areas were easiest and most rewarding? What areas were the most difficult?

Our accumulated life experiences make us who we are and shape how we view the world. When we are confronted with conflicting values or views of the world we must either accept or reject what we are seeing. This process of cognitive development is exactly what we experience on a daily basis as we learn to live in another culture. If something does not match what we know, we must evaluate it—and either accommodate the information or reject it. Living in another culture is usually a profound experience that causes us to grow rapidly...more rapidly than if we had remained at home in a familiar environment.

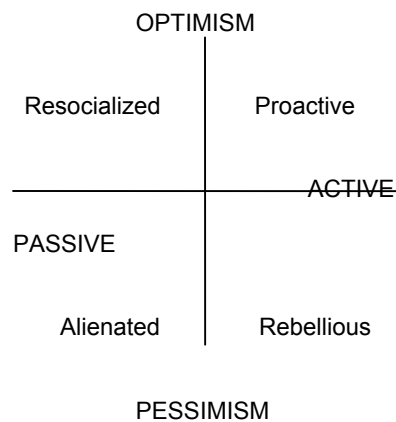


Figure 1: Adler, Nancy J. “Reentry: Managing Cross-Cultural Transitions,” *Group and Organization Studies*, 1981, 6(3)