

ONE WORLD... OR MANY?

by Dennis White, Ph.D.

In discussing the purpose and many benefits of international exchange programs, one of the most commonly heard assumptions is that when people from different cultures live together, they can eventually cut through the barriers of language and custom to find that, all over the world, people are basically alike. This has been dubbed by some the “One World” theory - the idea that language and other cultural differences are relatively superficial, and that basically people are the same.

This widespread belief is one of the motivating factors for many of the thousands of people, around the world, who dedicate countless hours of time to promoting and organizing a wide variety of exchange programs. It is also a belief that seems to be largely validated by the experiences of those people who see how much understanding and brotherhood are enhanced, at a person-to-person level, by these programs. The close and lasting relationships that are developed in exchange programs are legendary. There is probably not a person with experience in exchange programs that does not have stories of students, host families or parents returning for weddings or other events, years after the initial exchange.

While the “One World” theory may be a positive motivator, there are some fundamental obstacles in it that make approaching intercultural relation from another point of view worth considering. In fact, it may be that some of the problems in international exchange programs come from an over emphasis on the “One World” theory. For example, most people are relatively familiar with the concept of culture shock - the physical, emotional and intellectual disorientation that often accompanies immersion in a totally new cultural environment. While most exchange students are trained to expect and cope with this phenomenon and eventually get through it, many do not. They experience what might be termed a chronic culture shock. Although there may be complex reasons for this, and each case is unique, this never-ending shock may be in part due to being stuck in the “One World” approach.

After adjusting to superficial differences, and after finding some common ground, some exchange students become frustrated by differences that appear to be at a very fundamental level. They are confronted with the new reality that, at a very basic level, different cultures may view the world differently in how they think, what they value and how they view relationships, among other things. When confronted with these differences, they may react by rejecting the host culture. This may be as “mild” as never really liking it but sticking it out, or as severe as returning early. As a part of this rejection they may either think that there is something wrong with them or wrong with the host culture, when, in fact, it is not a question of right or wrong, good or bad, but just different.

Another problem that can come from this unexpected confrontation of fundamental differences is when exchange students over-adapt to the host culture, rejecting their own culture as bad and adopting the new as good. This is sometimes referred to as “going native.” While this may appear to be a positive adjustment, it is often only when it is time to return home that problems appear. While they may physically return home, psychologically they feel homeless. Does this mean that the “One World” theory is bad and must be abandoned? Not necessarily. In fact, it is almost always the initial point of view of exchange students when they first get involved in exchange programs.

Instead, it may be more helpful to look at the “One World” theory as an important developmental stage, but not the final stage, in intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Instead of beginning with the basic assumption of similarities, it may be helpful to take the approach of cultural anthropologists and experts in intercultural communication who, instead, make a basic assumption of differences. This means, for example, that people differ not only in language, but that they differ in how they answer such basic questions as the character of human nature, the relationship of humans to nature, the importance of time in human activity, the purpose of human activity and the nature of human relationships. While all cultures address these questions, they don’t all answer them the same way.

As people grow up in their own cultures, they view the way they do things as right, natural, and possibly the only way to respond. This is the basis of what is called **ethnocentrism** - the tendency to view one’s own culture as the right, natural and only way. When one encounters another culture that is different, one then unconsciously judges that culture by one’s own cultural frame of reference. The very first encounter with the culturally different almost always provokes an extreme ethnocentric response of defensiveness toward people of the other culture, by criticizing or feeling superior to them.

After repeated exposure to another culture and the development of some cultural awareness, some people move on to a position where they can no longer deny the existence of differences between cultures, but neither can they accept the fundamental nature of those differences. This then becomes a stage of minimization of those differences, essentially recognizing they are there but are not as important as the basic underlying similarities between people. The “One World” theory is an example of this. The similarities are sometimes viewed in terms of physical needs (such as, we all have to eat, procreate and die) or in universal transcendent terms (such as we are all God’s children, or all people want and need to realize their individual potential).

While people in this stage are able to recognize and accept cultural differences, they are uncomfortable with emphasizing those differences and resolve them by minimizing their significance. But the resolution is still basically ethnocentric, in a more subtle way. For example, an American exchange student preparing to go

abroad might be advised, “When in doubt, just be yourself and you’ll do okay” (because people are people, and if you act “natural” others will respond in kind). This is subtle ethnocentrism in that it assumes that one’s natural self will be automatically understandable to others, and further, that the natural self will be valued and appreciated in another culture. In fact, being “natural” on the part of an American may be seen as being rude and disrespectful in another culture. When similarities are seen, they are also more commonly seen as “They are just like us”. Seldom does one hear the phrase, “We are just like them”.

People in this “minimizing of differences” stage of cultural awareness are certainly interested in other cultures. And many are able to participate effectively in most aspects of exchange programs. It is just that their tendency to resolve differences in this fashion is still ethnocentric, and thus, limits their potential for further understanding. The limiting factor is their own cultural frame of reference. There are further potential stages of cultural sensitivity, and they almost always come only after extended immersion in another culture, along with the development of substantial cultural competence. As a result there is a major shift from ethnocentrism to **ethnorelativism**. Ethnorelativism is conceptually different in that it assumes that cultures can only be understood relative to themselves. There is no natural, right standard that can be applied to all cultures. This assumes that one’s own culture is no more central to reality than any other, regardless of one’s own preferences.

The move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, is usually difficult, both intellectually and emotionally. If no one culture is inherently right or wrong, but just different, many people mistakenly conclude that they must necessarily approve of all aspects of all cultures. Although there is no necessity of ethically agreeing with all cultures in this stage, many people believe that is what they must do. As a result, they are often overwhelmed by this apparent dilemma, and either move on to a more developed stage of sensitivity, or fall back to some form of ethnocentrism.

On the other hand, moving to ethnorelative thinking can be liberating and exciting. One learns to expect and look for differences, knowing that understanding those differences will help give the new culture meaning and help make sense of it. Instead of judging another cultural practice as bad, because it is different, one looks for differences in behavior and values and tries to understand why they occur from the point of view of that culture.

For example, Americans tend to pride themselves on punctuality, especially in matters of business. In trying to make a business appointment in another culture, an American might find that his or her business counterpart arrives late, keeps them waiting, and then allows all sorts of interruptions, other business and social events to interfere. An ethnocentric interpretation might be that the other person isn’t very businesslike, is rude, disrespectful and disorganized. An ethnorelative view might be to try to understand why those behaviors and values are present,

and what they mean. It assumes that the above behavior is normal for that culture and that the person is behaving exactly as he or she should. In that culture, it may be that time is very past or future oriented, not present oriented. It may be that business and social life are constantly mixed, not separated. It may be that no disrespect whatsoever has been shown, and the other person may be behaving quite ethically, within the values of that culture.

Acceptance of these differences and trying to understand them leads to the ability to learn to adapt to them, when operating in that culture. Adaptation then becomes another developmental stage in ethnorelativism. It is more than the adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," because such behavior comes with an understanding of why it is important. As one might expect, this stage takes a considerable degree of cultural competence and the time in which to develop it. Many exchange students are just getting comfortable with this stage when their exchange year ends.

The final stage of ethnorelative awareness is an open-ended one. It usually doesn't come until an exchange student returns to his or her own native culture for a while. It is a stage of true integration of a multicultural point of view. The person is essentially at home and competent in at least two cultures, often ones with radically different points of view on many basic aspects of life. Paradoxically, the person is also not really at home in either culture. This is the comment of countless students, even years after their return. Because they can now see their own culture from another point of view, and because they have lived life from that point of view, they can never be exactly as they were before. On the other hand, no matter how well they adapted to the host culture, they know that is not completely "them" either. Without some help in understanding this process, these returned exchange students can spend a long time only experiencing the negative side of this cultural "no man's land".

In time, and with some help interpreting their experiences, they can come to see that they now view their own culture more clearly, often appreciating it much more, while also being more critical of it. They develop a sharper concept of who they are and what they stand for. At the same time, they understand and appreciate at least one other culture that is different from theirs, and different at some fundamental levels. They have learned to appreciate those different behaviors and values as being just as right and valid for that culture as theirs are for their own culture.

People with a true multi-cultural or at least bi-cultural orientation, who have integrated those awarenesses, think not in terms of one world, but instead, of many worlds. But they are not so concerned that these differences exist. They not only tolerate differences, they appreciate them. They become part of an ongoing process of moving in and out of their own cultural context. Since they are not bound by their native cultural frame of reference at all times any more, they are able to shift, appropriately, among points of view.

When we send exchange students around the world and tell them it will be the experience of a lifetime, we are speaking the truth. By learning to be culturally competent and by developing a high level of cultural sensitivity, we are helping them change so much that they will never really be the same. They can learn that people are basically alike in many ways, as in the “one world” theory. But they can also learn to function in, and think of the world, as many very fundamentally different cultures. They can learn to understand and value the “many worlds” of our planet.

Rebound Training

An Outline of Key Points in Training Rebound Students by Dennis White, Ph.D.

Basic Assumption: To understand the process of reverse culture shock and related re-entry issues, one must first more fully understand the process of culture shock itself. Reverse culture shock is almost exactly the same as culture shock, and is to be expected. Reverse culture shock often becomes more of a problem because people do not expect it, they do not understand it, and they try to avoid it. The best preparation for reverse culture shock is to explain it, so that people anticipate it and see it as a positive sign that their intercultural experience was successful.

Learning Points

1. People who have extended intercultural living experiences go through a continual process of culture shock.
2. This cultural shock is not a one-time event, but rather a process of increasingly subtle immersion into a culture.
3. The most typical progression involves repeated cycling through four stages:
 - a. Euphoria and enthusiasm
 - b. Disillusionment and negativism (Sometimes masked by denial of problems)
 - c. Gradual adaptation.
 - d. Bicultural competence.
4. Culture Shock is a necessary component of successfully developing intercultural sensitivity and bicultural competence. It cannot and should not be avoided.
5. Both Culture Shock and Reverse Culture Shock can be viewed as parts of a larger process of moving from Ethnocentrism to Ethnorelativism.

6. We can and do prepare for culture shock- Most people expect some degree of culture shock in preparing for an extended intercultural stay and are therefore not too surprised when it happens.
7. Reverse Culture Shock, upon Re-Entry into one's own native culture, after an extended intercultural experience, follows almost exactly the same process.
8. Reverse Culture Shock is often a more difficult experience because:
 - a. People do not expect it (the people experiencing it as well as the people around them).
 - b. People do not realize how much they have changed.
 - c. People think there is something wrong with them for experiencing culture shock in their own native culture.
 - d. Even if people anticipate reverse culture shock, they tend to underestimate its impact.
 - e. Reverse culture shock can actually take longer to deal with than culture shock.
9. Some of the negative aspects of reverse culture shock will vary according to whether exchange students are returning to high school, going on to higher education or entering the world of work. Some aspects of reverse culture shock are more characteristic of some of these situations than others.
10. Educational preparation is the key to minimizing the negative aspects of reverse culture shock. It is as important to educate parents, as it is exchange students. YEOs need to understand this process as well.

So You Think They're Home Now Some Thoughts for Parents of Returning Exchange Students By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Reverse Culture Shock

They're back! Your "kids" have come home, and the exchange program is over - or so you think! But it's probably not so simple as that. First, the "kid" you sent off a year ago is, for the most part, a young adult and certainly changed in many ways. Second, they may be experiencing some confusion as to where "home" is. And third, while the year abroad has ended, the exchange program and many of its effects on them and you has just begun. You and your son or daughter may have already begun to experience a phenomenon known as "Reverse Culture Shock" or "Re-Entry Shock." (This is explained in more detail in a companion article for returning exchange students entitled "So You Think You're Home Again: Some Thoughts on Returning "Home").

Re-entry shock is essentially the period of disorientation that comes from returning to one's native culture after an extended stay abroad. It may follow a predictable course or be entirely unique. It may last a few weeks or many months. It may be recognizable, or so subtle as to be almost missed. It may be more or less difficult to deal with. But one thing is almost certain -if your son or daughter had the positive, mind-broadening type of experience you wanted them to have this past year, they will experience re-entry shock. If you can anticipate and accept this phenomenon, then it will be easier to deal with, and you will be able to see it as a positive, if sometimes difficult, extension of the exchange program.

Stages

Returning exchange students (as well as Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, diplomats, etc.) generally go through recognizable stages in their readjustment to "home". These include:

1. Euphoria - Almost non-stop enthusiasm (and talking) about their experiences and awareness that they have become "citizens of the world."
2. Hostility and Rejection - Dissatisfaction with anything and everything back home. They may arrive in this stage, without ever experiencing the euphoria stage, for several reasons:
 - a. They probably weren't ready to come home. They wanted the exchange to last longer.
 - b. They may expect things to be just the same as they were when they left. Or just the opposite, they expect everyone to have changed as much as they have.
 - c. They came "home" sad because they have left new "family" and friends that they may never see again.
 - d. They were not prepared to experience reverse culture shock, or didn't think it would happen to them.
3. Denial and Reversion - Instead of No. 2, they may act as if nothing has changed (including themselves) and profess how great it is to be back and to fit in so well.
4. Eventual Adaptation - an ability to integrate what they now know about the world and themselves into a new acceptance of their own culture and their place in it. This is what is known as true biculturalism: the ability to move from one cultural orientation to another as the situation calls for it.

How They Describe It

Many of us wish we could just jump to Stage 4 or mistakenly think we are already there when we step off the plane. But it's not that simple - and - it's a process, just like getting used to the host country, in the first place. Here are some of the common concerns your son or daughter may experience during the re-entry

period. They may be reluctant to express some of them, but none are unusual or harmful:

1. My parents don't understand me. They expect me to be the same little kid I was when I left.
2. I feel closer to my host family than I do to my own parents. I'm afraid my parents will be hurt if they find out.
3. It's difficult for me to readjust to my old lifestyle. Everything here is so rushed, so materialistic, so ..
4. I made so many friends and now I'll never see them again.
5. I don't like it here. I want to go back
6. I didn't have an easy time in my host country. Now everyone is discussing what a wonderful experience I had. They don't know what it was really like.
7. I don't find my old friends very interesting anymore. We don't have much in common.

What You Can Do

Here are some suggestions to help you, and them, go through this process. Most are just that, suggestions, and you may find your own instincts are still your best guide.

1. Remember - they have changed. And they would have changed some even if they hadn't gone abroad. But you would have adjusted to that change gradually because you would have been living with it every day. Some of the "shock" to you comes from seeing it all at once.
2. Remember - you, other family members and friends have probably changed too. They may tell you about that. But life hasn't just been sitting around like videotape on pause waiting for them to come back. Part of their adjustment problem may be that they expect everything to be as it was, and they will be "thrown off course" when it isn't.
3. They have become more self-confident, self-reliant and independent, which sounds a lot like what we call adulthood. Therefore, there will be inevitable conflict as you and they decide how to handle this. While there is no "right" solution, expect that you will end up giving them more freedom than you did in the past. They, in turn, will have to accept more controls than they think they need.
4. If it's not too late already, try to resist the urge to throw gala welcome home parties right away. For many reasons, these can be overwhelming, even though everyone's intentions are good. Jet lag, changes in diet, climate, clothing, extended travel, separation from close friends (in the host country), and other things are very disorienting. Smaller gatherings, when requested by your student when they feel up to it, can be much more satisfying.
5. In general, as an extension of No. 4, try to help them take everything as "slow and easy" as possible. For the student who has to work or is straight off to college, it may just be a little harder. But most people

think, feel and act better when they are rested and get a chance to “re-enter” at a more reasonable pace.

6. Be tolerant of some of their unusual behavior, such as: talking all the time, never talking, being critical of you, your home, their native country, being frustrated that more people don't seem interested in what they did, etc.
7. Along with No. 6, whenever possible, try to validate their experience, even if you can't understand it. Let them know whatever they are feeling, it is okay, and that lots of different feelings are normal.
8. Keep in touch with other returned exchange students, their families, and students who have been back for several years. They can help your student and you through some of the difficult times. They can tell you that it usually does work out in the end, including the fact that most returned exchange students become closer to their families than ever before, while sometimes more distant from friends.
9. Finally and most importantly - listen. Most of them feel a great need to talk, often in what sounds like repetitious patterns. You may soon become the only people who will have the patience to keep listening. While they need to talk, some may do just the opposite and withdraw; this is unusual either. They will talk in time. (One student reported it was a full year before he really shared his experiences with his family. However, he also reported that he felt closer to them almost immediately.)

Remember, re-entry shock is to be expected and is a part of the experience. You have been in on this exchange from the start - sharing many of the ups and downs. Remember about two years ago when they were selected? Remember the whole year it took you to adjust? Remember all the letters and phone calls, the peaks and valleys? Well, you are a part of the re-entry, too. You will be a part of the ongoing adjustment of your son or daughter, so anticipate it, accept it and, in turn, make it a positive experience for all of you.

So You Think You're Home Again: Some Thoughts for Exchange Students Returning "Home"

By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Initial Culture Shock

Remember what it was like those first few weeks and months going abroad? It was new, exciting, often confusing, and always changing. And while your whole year may have been exciting, it wasn't always pleasant. You probably became irritated with, and even hostile to, your host culture when the deeper differences between your culture and their culture became apparent. As you began to develop real language skills, and you better understood fundamentally different cultural values, you began the slow process of adapting. Eventually, maybe only at the end of your stay, you began to realize how you could really fit in - adapting fairly well to your adopted culture, while maintaining your own native cultural

identity. You became bicultural. And then, just when it was getting good, the year was over and you had to go “home”.

Most people who live abroad for an extended time go through similar successive stages of culture shock. These stages are generally recognized as being:

1. Initial Excitement or Euphoria
2. Irritability and Hostility
3. Slow and Gradual Adaptation
4. Eventual Adjustment to Biculturalism

If your experience was anything like this, you learned that culture shock is not just adjusting to jet lag and different food. It is an on-going process of developing increased cultural competence, by being “shocked” by differences, adjusting to them, learning new skills and eventually adapting. And when you prepared for going abroad, you had some expectation that you would experience culture shock. It is not possible (or even desirable) to avoid culture shock, but at least anticipating it made it somewhat easier -and kept you from thinking it was all your fault, or all the new culture’s fault.

Reverse Culture Shock

As you return home, you are likely to experience some very similar, but possibly surprising reactions that are part of what is known as reverse culture shock, or re-entry shock. In the first few weeks back, many people feel the effects of jet lag, general exhaustion from lots of changes, fatigue from an overdose of “welcome home” parties and trying to do and see everything and everyone at once. This flurry of activity can cause a significant degree of disorientation, making it difficult to tell exactly what thoughts and feelings you are having.

Mixed in with all of this are two distinct and often conflicting reactions. One is the same excitement stage as in initial culture shock. It may be very exciting to be back, to see family and friends, to tell about your adventures and to do things you have missed for a year. If this reaction occurs, it fairly quickly wears off, and is replaced by the second stage of culture shock - irritability and hostility. This stage often comes much more quickly than in initial culture shock, and can be much more severe and disturbing. It also may be the first reaction you have to coming home, with no excitement stage at all.

There are several reasons that you may not feel excitement at all, or for very long. Remember, when you went abroad initially:

1. You wanted to go.
2. You expected and looked forward to learning about different things.
3. You were warned to expect culture shock.
4. Though you may have been sad to leave family and friends, you knew it would not be forever – you knew you were coming back.

Now that you are returning at the end of your exchange year:

1. You may not want to come home.
2. You may expect things to be just like they were when you left (or at least that things will be very familiar)
3. You may not have been sufficiently warned about reverse culture shock (or you didn't think it would happen to you).
4. You may be very sad to leave friends and "family" in your host culture because you know there is a possibility that you may never see them again.

If reverse culture shock is so unpleasant, why not try to avoid it? Because it is impossible if your exchange year was successful. In fact, the extent to which you immersed yourself in your host culture, and truly adapted, is probably the best indicator of how much reverse culture shock you will experience. People who don't have much trouble re-adapting to their native culture probably didn't get very involved in their host culture. They didn't change much, so they don't have to readjust much.

The Extent of Change

If your exchange year was a success, you have changed in ways that you probably cannot describe, or completely understand yet. You have become a skilled world traveler. You are a skilled bicultural person. You can actually get along quite well, not just be a tourist, in another culture. You have learned to think of things differently by looking at the world from someone else's point of view long enough to really understand it. In a sense, you have become a citizen of the world, so it may be more than a little confusing to think of where "home" is. Some of these things will probably happen to you. You will find yourself thinking or dreaming in your new language. You will try to explain something to someone back home and not be able to give a precise translation of what you are talking about. You will talk to your parents about one of your host parents, calling the host parent "mom" or "dad". You will think your hometown is very small, or that your friends think in "small" ways.

So don't be too surprised if your family and friends seem a bit uncomfortable with you. They probably are, because you aren't the same person who left them a year ago. Don't underestimate how much you have changed and how strange you may seem to those who knew you before. You may be very proud of your independence, self-confidence and internationalism. But they may see you as self-absorbed, critical of everything and not interested in fitting in.

Remember that those around you may have changed as well, if not in the same ways you have. If you are expecting things to be the same, you will have more of a shock than if you are looking for changes. Your friends have had a year of growing and maturing, and your family situation may have changed (deaths, divorces, moves, job changes). You missed some important events in their lives, just as they missed some important ones in yours. Even those things that haven't

really changed may seem quite different, because you see them differently. Though you may love your native country more than ever, you are also much more likely to be critical of it, and question common cultural practices that you took for granted before you left.

Ways To Deal With Reverse Culture Shock

The single best thing you can do is to anticipate and accept that you will experience some degree of reverse culture shock. The worst thing you can do is to deny it, or try to avoid it. People often try to deny it because they think there might be something wrong with them if they admit it. It is, in fact, very normal, and you will have more problems than necessary if you try to deny it. More than anticipating and accepting reverse culture shock, you can actually view it as a positive, if sometimes painful, growth experience. It is, and can be, the completion of the circle of change in an intercultural experience. I like to think of it as the third year of your exchange. The first was the year preparing to go abroad. The second was the actual exchange. The third is the year when you can more completely appreciate the changes you have made, the readjustment to your native culture, and the fact that you will be bicultural for the rest of your life. In subsequent years you will have times when you re-experience reverse culture shock, and when you feel like you just got home again; but it will never be as shocking an experience as that first year back.

You can also help yourself by talking about your feelings as often as you can. You may wear out lots of initially sympathetic ears doing this. You may notice that you seem to have an almost incessant need to talk about your experiences. Your friends, especially, may get impatient with you, so you may need to learn to be selective with whom you share your experiences. There is often a conflicting urge to keep it all to yourself, because you think people won't understand or don't care, or because you think that talking about it in the past tense confirms that it is over - and you don't want to accept that. (Many students don't completely unpack for months, for the same reason - they don't want to admit that it is over.) Of course, that's the issue - it's over and it isn't. The experience is over, but not the memories and the impact on your life.

Sometimes it's best to find other recently returned students, or even people who have been back for years. You can tell how this feeling lingers when exchange students, Peace Corps Volunteers or missionaries start talking about their experiences, even if many years ago. They get excited, they can't stop talking, and they get a glassy, far-off look on their faces. And don't underestimate your parents as listeners. Sometimes they are the only ones who will politely listen as you tell a story for the hundredth time. But however you do it, talk. It is in this way that you can help others understand you, and more importantly, learn to clarify your thoughts and feelings and better understand yourself.

You can also make things easier for yourself by trying not to make too many big decisions, unless you absolutely have to. Don't be impatient with yourself if you

have trouble making decisions. Your goals in life may have changed. Because you have a new perspective, some of the plans you made a year or more ago may not seem as relevant now. Remind yourself, your family and friends that you are going through a period of adjustment; and it may take time for you to sort things out.

Finally, don't be too concerned if the course of your reverse culture shock doesn't seem to follow the pattern described here. Each of your experiences abroad was unique, and so will be your re-entry. While your year abroad was probably of great value to you, you may not have had the same emotional attachment to people that other students describe. So you may not have as much trouble letting go of those attachments and getting on in life with new and renewed friends. Going on to college or university is also quite different than returning to high school, and some of the issues are different for these two situations.

Feeling "At Home"

Reverse culture shock subsides, though it never disappears. Eventually you will come to terms with yourself and your "new" native culture, incorporating the fact that you are now a member of another culture as well. You can learn to be at peace with true biculturalism. This is the ability to move from cultural practice to cultural practice, with skill, as the situation calls for it. And while you may somewhat sadly come to accept that you can never truly come "home" again, you can learn to feel "at home" in the world at large.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL LIVING **By Dennis White, Ph.D.**

What is the psychological impact of living or traveling for extended periods abroad? What happens to people when they live, work or study for an extended time in another culture? And what are the implications for them when they come home? These are questions studied by experts in intercultural communication who work with youth exchange programs, international businesses, missionaries, government agencies and other groups that, increasingly, send people overseas. Although the average person may never leave his or her native soil, it is actually surprising how many people, from all over the world, end up spending some significant time in a foreign culture. And almost all of us know of a family member, friend or associate who has lived or traveled abroad, or who has hosted an exchange student or someone else from a foreign country.

Nevertheless, few of us understand the significance of this experience on one another, both during the stay abroad and, some times more significantly, after the return. Most of us are at least familiar with the term "culture shock". We may think of it as the temporary disorientation that comes from being exposed to a different language, different customs, food, etc. What we don't often realize is that it is usually a rather profound reaction to fairly significant other differences, in the way

people view the world, in the way they think and what they value. Tourists often experience culture shock at a superficial level. People who actually live in another culture can experience it as an on-going reaction and adaptation to basic differences. Culture shock usually proceeds through fairly recognizable stages. These include:

Initial euphoria

This is the “high” feeling that usually comes with being exposed to so many new, strange and interesting things. It doesn’t really matter that we can’t always understand all of it, because there is so much to see and do. However, this is often followed by:

Hostility

This is a feeling of rejection and alienation when real differences are experienced, but not understood. People in this stage understand that things are really different, but they also can’t help feeling they are also wrong. It just doesn’t feel natural to them. If people don’t give up in frustration at this stage they usually then enter a fairly long phase of:

Gradual Adjustment

In this phase people begin to learn skills that make them culturally competent, like language fluency and putting cultural practices in the proper context. Finally, when they become skilled enough, they enter the last phase of:

Biculturalism

In this phase, they may not function like a native, but they can function in such a way that they fit in relatively well to the culture in which they live. And they can move back and forth, from culture to culture, with some ease.

People know they are in the third or fourth stages when they notice things like dreaming in the new language, or learning an idiomatic expression in the new language that doesn’t have a precise translation into their native language. They may notice that they have overcome a natural habit from their own culture and replaced it with a new one, such as a gesture or a way of eating food.

But perhaps the most interesting and least understood aspect of living abroad comes upon the return home.

While most people understand and expect some sort of culture shock when going abroad, few understand and expect that they will experience a similar reverse culture shock upon returning home. They usually don’t expect it because they assume that they already know their own culture, so it shouldn’t be strange to them. They also don’t expect it because they seldom realize until they get home just how much they themselves have changed. In fact, they usually think it is their friends and families that have changed.

After an initial euphoric period upon return, during which everything may seem so wonderfully normal again, there is often an uncomfortable rejection of some or all aspects of one’s own culture. Because they have learned alternate ways of doing things and viewing the world, they may find that some of these ways seem better

to them than the practices of their own native culture. They may even become super critical of their own culture. This is the hardest period for them, and for their friends and families, who may become very tired of having “home” judged so negatively. They may seem “stuck up” and excessively critical. But eventually they move into a phase of adaptation back to their own native culture, often appreciating why their country is the way it is much more than ever before. Eventually, they can come to a stage of true biculturalism, where they can see the world from at least two points of view, and can move back and forth in their thinking, as the situation calls for it.

People who live for a time in another culture and return home go through some significant psychological stressors. As a result, they are changed in ways they could never have imagined. While the change is often difficult, they almost universally see it as positive, and extremely broadening. And if the international experience has been successful, we expect both culture shock and reverse culture shock to occur. They are signs that the person is being challenged and broadened by the experience. So rather than trying to avoid these phenomena, the best preparation is to expect them both in going abroad and upon returning. Although they generally return home and remain loyal citizens of their own countries, participants in exchange programs and other extended intercultural stays know that they are different. They have begun to be citizens of the world. They have brought back a part of another culture with them, and their concept of “home” will never be quite the same again.

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