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Sojourners to Another Country: The Psychological Roller-Coaster of Cultural Transitions

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Sojourners to Another Country: The Psychological Roller-Coaster of Cultural Transitions

Abstract

Cultural sojourners are temporary visitors to another country who return to their home country. They can be students enrolled in a foreign university or corporate employees assigned to an international branch of their company. This chapter explores the psychological aspects of the cultural transition cycle experienced by the sojourner. The concepts of enculturation and cultural identity are introduced followed by a discussion of a transition model which focuses on awareness, adjustment, adaptation, self-concept change, cultural identity response and repatriation. Ideas for minimizing repatriation distress are suggested.

Introduction

Cross-cultural psychologists refer to temporary visitors to another country as cultural sojourners. The visitors might be students or tourists, humanitarian aid workers or missionaries, government diplomats or corporate executives. In any year, the total number of cultural sojourners worldwide might number in the millions. You might be or have been a sojourner. Perhaps you are studying in a country outside your "passport" country. Perhaps one of your parents was re-located to work in another country and you spent part of your adolescence away from home.

Dorothy Gale, the heroine of the Wizard of Oz, was one such sojourner although a reluctant one. She was whisked by a tornado from her rural farm in Kansas to the Land of Oz. If you've seen the movie, you know what I mean. Dorothy had a lot to get used to in Oz: good and bad witches, talking scarecrows, cowardly lions, transportation via life-sized bubbles, and magic potions. Dorothy had to adjust her thinking and behavior to fit the new circumstances in which she found herself, she needed to make new friends and achieve her objectives, chief of which was finding the quickest way back to Kansas. And when she finally arrived back home, she discovered what many sojourners have learned: that no one really understands your sojourner experiences and that life back home may never be the same. In fact, had there been a sequel, Wizard of Oz 2, we might have found Dorothy moping around the farm, bored with horses that didn't change colors, yawning at conventional transportation by bicycle, missing the adoration of the vanquished witch's army and all of the Munchkins.

Not only novelists but cross-cultural psychologists also are interested in understanding the psychological process of living in another country and also the process of returning home. We call this psychological process the cultural transition cycle and the cycle can be broken into several temporal stages: preparation for the sojourn, the sojourn itself (which may have several mini-stages within it) when a sojourner may be called an "expatriate", preparation for the return home, and the return, when the sojourner may be called a "repatriate".

So what happens to you when you are a sojourner and why would psychologists be interested? In order to understand the sojourner cycle, we need to begin before the sojourn – in fact, way before the sojourn. We need to discuss the fact that we all are cultural beings (you probably read that in other chapters of this e-book). But we are not born that way; we are not instant Americans or mini-Japanese or presto-Italians. We don't begin life preferring coffee over tea, dinner at 6 pm rather than at 10 pm, or choosing to live apart from your parents at age 18 rather than at 50. Rather, through a process called enculturation, we learn to think and act similarly to other people in our country. Our parents, friends, teachers, cartoons and movies, television and newspapers, all play a role in teaching us to prefer what others in our country prefer. And when the enculturation process is complete, in late adolescence, these cultural preferences and ways of thinking and acting, settle on us like a comfortable pair of eye glasses. Our cultural perspective on the world, like properly-made glasses, shapes everything we see, how we interpret what we see, and how we act (Triandis, 1989). And our cultural perspective, also like

comfortable glasses, becomes invisible. We forget the details of our childhood enculturation process and all the possible ways of acting and thinking which have been discarded along the way. Our cultural perspective now becomes part of our identity – who we are – just like gender (male or female) or role (student or office worker) or ability (athlete or musician) is part of our identity. Social psychologists refer to the sum total of these parts of our identity as our self-concept. Being American or Korean or Peruvian becomes part of our identity and self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In countries that have multiple ethnic, language, religious or racial groups, there might be additional enculturation processes which influence our behavior and identity. Many people have complex cultural identities.

The not-so-strange thing is that since cultural identity is invisible, most adults are not aware of how their thinking and acting and interpreting has been shaped. (In fact, people in some countries, like the United States, think that there isn't a national culture at all – that our behavior is motivated by our unique personalities and not by our cultural education). But all people assume that their way of thinking and acting and interpreting is the right, moral, ethical and natural way of doing things. And that's fine, as long as you only spend time with people who think and act the same way you do!

Now we get to the sojourner issue: What happens when you leave your home country to live and study or work in another country? I have suggested a model to think about sojourners which examines cultural identity and its changes throughout the cultural transition cycle (Sussman, 2000). The figure at the end of this chapter shows the important factors and the time line. Step one of the model shows, through the shading of the block, that before we move to another country we are not aware of our cultural identity or which of our everyday behaviors and ways of thinking have a cultural origin.

However, like Dorothy Gale in Oz, sojourners quickly discover that people in their host country, think, interpret and act differently than they do. For example: the residents of Oz, Munchkin and Witch alike, interpreted the falling of the tornado-tossed house on top of the Wicked Witch of the East and her subsequent death, as an intentional act on Dorothy's part; that people could control the movement of houses (however, the act was evaluated differently by the two groups – as positive, by the Munchkins who were freed from the terror of the Witch of the East, or as negative, by the sister of the Witch of the East). Of course, if you are like most sojourners, not only will you notice that things are different in your new country; you'll also think that what the hosts do is incorrect or inappropriate. Ask an American on which side of the road they drive in England, and she'll say "The wrong side".

Most sojourners also quickly become aware of those host country behaviors that make them comfortable and at ease, and which behaviors make them feel anxious and uncomfortable. For Americans, waiting in line to board a bus and then entering the bus in that line feels good and right. Everyone trying to get in the bus at the same time with no regard to who arrived first feels unfair and wrong. For Italian students, being given a list of books to read at the beginning of the school year and then being tested on them at the end of the year feels proper and adult. Being told which chapters to read each week and being quizzed on them at periodic intervals feels juvenile. Ironically, through the experiences with

the behaviors and thinking of the host country members, sojourners begin to understand their home culture patterns and identity. These once-invisible preferences, values and thoughts emerge into awareness – sojourners are beginning to understand all the behaviors, small and large, that form their cultural selves. In the model, the cultural identity block becomes clear and unshaded – step two. Ah, ha – so I am "an American" after all and these are the values and behaviors and ways of thinking that combine to form what it means to be "an American".

Now begins step three : the adjustment process. Sojourners are now experiencing the daily recognition that there are many, many, many differences between home country and host country. And I don't mean just the language differences. Members of the host country stand too close or too far away when having a conversation; they touch too much or not enough; they gesture all the time or too little; they show too much emotion or not enough; they say "yes" but act "no"; they are too friendly or not friendly enough; they speak too loudly or not loud enough; they get up too early or go to bed too late; the stores are never open when the sojourner needs them; the buildings are too cold or too hot; the people smell like people or they smell like flowers and trees; dating practices are too restrictive or too permissive; education involves too much self-initiative or is too paternalistic; the host members are too frugal or too wasteful; people are too aggressive in the street or are too polite.

There is no end to the differences. Sojourners need to meet the daily recognition of differences with daily decisions on how to respond. Should they wait their turn at the bus stop (which makes them feel culturally comfortable but ineffective) or charge the opened bus door (which makes them feel vaguely underhanded but results in a seat on the bus to school)? Should they wear shorts (which keeps them cool in this hot climate but offends the locals' sense of propriety) or should they keep their bodies covered (which is stifling and restrictive but enables them to blend in with your neighbors)?

And all these differences and decisions can lead sojourners to feel emotionally uncomfortable, mentally exhausted and physiologically stressed. The body is actually reacting as though it had just confronted a saber-toothed tiger – the heart is racing, appetite and sleep disturbed, concentration is wavering. The sojourner is experiencing "culture shock" – the syndrome that encompasses all of these responses to understanding that "...we aren't in Kansas anymore." The physiological stress is accompanied by two additional symptoms described by Colleen Ward (2001), psychological responses (anxiety, depression, sadness, anger) and sociocultural responses (inappropriate thinking or behaving).

Amazingly, the majority of sojourners do make sufficient cultural adjustments and changes in their thinking and behaving to become at least marginally effective within the host country without going over the deep end. Some sojourners make a lot of changes and begin to act similar to the host country members. Sometimes it is said that these sojourners have "gone native". Some sojourners make fewer adjustments and changes and spend their time with their compatriots or other internationals living in the host country. Still others have selectively chosen aspects of host country which feel comfortable and they have adjusted to those behaviors or values.

In each case, sojourners reach some equilibrium, allowing them to balance comfort (defined by home culture) with effectiveness (defined by host country members). Step four of the Cultural Identity model suggests that several personal factors influence how much we adjust to the host country including how flexible we are and how important our cultural identity is to us. And there are several external factors which influence how much we adjust, including the cultural distance between our home and host country and particular cultural values embraced by our home culture (which either encourages or discourages tradition).

At this point in the sojourn, we can say that the expatriate has adapted in some unique fashion to the sojourner context. The adapted expatriate can successfully meet his or her objectives: accomplish work, transact business, make friends, learn new subjects, distribute aid, negotiate treaties, convert the heathen, purchase groceries, and/or have fun.

Some researchers had suggested that the adjustment and adaptation cycle has predictable emotional mini-stages within it – the "honeymoon" phase, the culture shock phase, the recovery phase, etc. Further, these phases, if one charted the sojourner's satisfaction level, follow a chronological pattern called the "U-curve" of adjustment cycle (Lysgaard, 1955). While this notion has been discussed for more than 40 years and has a common-sense appeal, there is very little scientifically-based research to support the idea. In fact, some researchers (Ward & Kennedy, 1996) have found the opposite pattern among sojourners – low satisfaction in the beginning and end of the sojourn and higher satisfaction in the middle. Kealey (1989) in a longitudinal study of Canadian expatriates found only 10% of the sojourners experienced the "classic" U-curve of adjustment.

But all these changes in how we act and think can come around and bite us! Step five of the cultural identity model suggests that if we have incorporated many aspects of host country behaviors, values, and ways of thinking into our own repertoire, our ideas about ourselves may also have changed. Social psychologists call this a self-concept disturbance. Who we are and how we think about ourselves may not be as clear to us as it was before the sojourn began. The lack of clarity regarding our self-concept and cultural identity becomes engaged when we return to our home country, step six of the transition model.

The very nature of the sojourn experience is that the traveler returns home – six months may have passed or six years – as the length of sojourns vary. But returning home is not a simple matter, psychologically. Although one might think that speaking one's native language again, being among family and friends, and seeing familiar sights would require little adjustment, most repatriates experience some distress. I believe that repatriation shock is due, in large part, to those changes sojourners made in their behavior and thinking, the changes that helped them be more effective in the host country, the changes that led to self-concept disturbances. All these changes result in cultural identity responses that are not understood by most sojourners yet have upsetting consequences. Expatriates are not expecting that coming home will cause any problems and these erroneous expectations can lead to repatriation problems being increased.

Step seven focuses on the invisible cultural identity component but very real emotional reactions. Some repatriates feel as though they no longer fit into their home

country. I call this the "subtractive" identity response. They feel "less" American or Chinese or Brazilian. The once-familiar ways of behaving appear strange and cherished values seem unimportant, irrelevant or negative. These repatriates feel different from their family and find it difficult to relate to friends and co-workers.

Another type of identity response also results in distress and discomfort upon returning home but for slightly different reasons. These repatriates experience distress because they have interwoven many of the host country's values and behaviors into their own. I call this the "additive" identity response. And acting on the host country values and behaviors when back in the home country causes discomfort for repatriates and those in contact with them. When I returned to the U.S. after a sojourn in Japan, one of my "additive" behaviors was to insist that all visitors to my home remove their shoes. This annoyed friends and deliverymen equally.

Some repatriates experience both subtractive and additive identity shifts and this leads to a double dose of repatriation shock. In fact, all the distress is amplified because most repatriates are unaware of why they are experiencing discomfort. They don't realize how their overseas adjustments have changed their cultural identity which in turn affected their re-adjustment back home.

If returning home following a sojourn is distressing and uncomfortable, I hope that you don't conclude that you should avoid cross-cultural experiences. To the contrary, cultural sojourns increase intercultural sensitivity, provide alternative ways to behave and interpret the world, improve understanding of why people in other countries behave and think the way they do, and of course, sojourns usually are great fun. Fortunately, my research and that of other psychologists indicate that repatriation distress can be minimized (Sussman, 1986) by following a few suggestions.

First, expatriates should psychologically prepare for their return home

They should think about their sojourn and the ways in which they have changed. Psychologists call this process of thinking about oneself as "introspection". What aspects of the host country will be missed? With which friends or co-workers do they want to remain in contact? How have friends and family at home changed during the expatriate's absence?

Second, the element of surprise needs to be removed

The expatriate needs to understand that the first few months at home might be distressing but that this is a normal part of the cultural transition cycle. Further, if the repatriate experiences distress, they need to appropriately label the feeling as repatriation distress and avoid misattributing negative feelings to one's friends, family, school, teachers, co-workers or job (Sussman, 2001). Many repatriates precipitously quit jobs, move cities, or end relationships following repatriation because they mistakenly attribute the source of their unhappiness to a job, a city or a boyfriend.

Third, repatriates should accept the unfortunate fact that friends and family will not fully understand their sojourn experiences.

In fact, as repatriates expound on the humorous but lengthy cross-cultural tales of using an inappropriate nonverbal gesture or getting on the wrong bus, friends' eyes glaze over in boredom! Repatriates need to select a few highlights of their sojourn and make their accounts succinct.

Fourth, repatriates should find kindred spirits who will appreciate their overseas and re-entry experiences.

Who might they be? Other repatriates, of course, or other people interested in the sojourn country or international relations, in general. Some students change their majors, join international clubs, befriend foreign students on the campus, pursue an international career, and seek other opportunities to return overseas. Of course, maintaining connections with the sojourn country through email, websites, music, film and television eases repatriation as well. It is easier today than ever to keep the cross-cultural ties fresh and stimulating.

Finally, repatriates need to recognize the gradually dissipating nature of repatriation distress.

For most repatriates, the feelings of discomfort, distress, and general upset associated with the return home are reduced considerably within 12-15 months following the re-entry home.

Does everyone returning home following a sojourn experience repatriation distress? The answer is no, but for several different reasons. One explanation is that not all sojourners experience a cultural identity change. Some expatriates, once their home country cultural identity becomes salient at the start of the sojourn, embrace this identity. I refer to them as having an "affirmative identity response" to the sojourn. These individuals revel in their newly emerged cultural identity and are delighted to return home at the conclusion of the sojourn – they are the "grateful repatriates".

Other groups of sojourners do not experience re-entry distress because they are old hands at cultural transitions. They may have moved back and forth between countries many times and have developed an "intercultural or global identity" whereby they easily shift from one set of cultural behaviors and thinking to another. Or they might have multicultural identities within their home country and are accustomed to "moving in and out" of the dominant culture (public behavior) and their ethnic culture (private or family behavior).

Finally, some sojourners may not experience severe repatriation distress because their home country values and encourages or demands fitting in and cultural harmony. Returning expatriates are aware that, once home, they need to again behave and think like their compatriots. The cultural identity mandate is clear and unambiguous.

So now you have seen the entire cultural transitions cycle of the sojourner. If you have been a sojourner, you might be surprised at the level of detailed analysis undertaken by psychologists. Hopefully, you have a better understanding of your own experience. Even if you have never left your home country, you should now be aware of the complexities of cultural identities, the changes in identity which a cultural sojourn can elicit, and the far-reaching consequences of cultural identity responses.

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About the Author

Dr. Nan M. Sussman is an experimental social psychologist and cross-cultural specialist. She was awarded a B.A. at the University of Pittsburgh and an M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Kansas. Growing up in Philadelphia, her four years in Kansas was her longest cross-cultural experience! In 1977, she was a Professional Associate at the East-West Center's Culture Learning Institute in Honolulu, Hawaii, a decidedly intercultural setting. In 1985, Dr. Sussman was selected as a Senior Fulbright Research Scholar to Japan where she taught at Keio University, conducted research on cultural transitions, and designed and delivered cultural training programs.

Dr. Sussman has taught at undergraduate level at the University of Pittsburgh and George Washington University and at the graduate level at American University and the City University of New York. She has also lectured at several Japanese universities, the American University of Rome, the University of the Philippines, Tribuvan University in Nepal, Shanghai University in China, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Dr. Sussman's research interests focus on culture and social and health behavior and includes the areas of cultural adaptation and cultural repatriation, nonverbal behavior, cross-cultural training, selection of personnel for overseas assignments, culture and social cognition/attribution. In 1983, Dr. Sussman founded Global Strategies, an international human resources management consulting firm and has assisted many corporations and organizations including the World Bank and A T & T.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Have you experienced a cultural sojourn? Discuss the details of the sojourn – where? why? Length of sojourn. Describe the stages of the experience: cultural identity salience, adjustment/adaptation, repatriation.
2. If you have not lived in another country, have you traveled internationally? Spent time in another region of your country? Moved to another city? How did you feel? Did you change your speech? Nonverbal behaviors? Other behaviors or ways of thinking?
3. Invite a repatriate to your classroom to discuss their experiences. (check the campus international office for suggestions or any international companies in your city)
4. Invite a foreign student to your classroom to discuss their experience.
5. Do you think that repatriation experiences differ for children? Adolescents? Why? Do men and women have differing experiences? Why?

6. Discuss bicultural or multicultural people. In what ways are they aware of their own and the dominant culture values and behaviors? Do they shift their behavior, gestures, dialect/slang when they move from home to the public settings?
7. How might culture provide implicit guidelines for cultural transitions?