

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 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 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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