



On Re-Entering One's Culture

Readjustment is a challenge for individuals when they return home from a relatively long residence in another culture. In many ways, it is very similar to the experience of a person who enters a new culture for the first time. The latter has been labeled as "culture shock" and the former as "reverse culture shock" or "reentry shock." Reentry shock is precipitated by the anxiety which often results when one tries to reestablish oneself in one's own culture after a prolonged absence. It is aggravated by a feeling of anger or alienation at the discovery that one has become a "stranger to one's own culture." There appear to be varying degrees of reentry shock, just as there are degrees of culture shock. Research literature has shown that individuals who have been most successful in adjusting to a new culture may have very great difficulty in readapting to their old culture (Brislin and VanBuren, 1974). For one thing, their self-confidence in their ability to adapt to changed or new situations -- exemplified by their successful adjustment to a new culture -- is severely tested. Thus, while such individuals may recognize that they are changed as a result of living in other cultures, the consequences of that change in relation to their home environment are new experiences. These changes are all the more traumatic because usually they are completely unexpected, or even unrecognized.

Excitement: There appear to be four distinctive patterns of response to the reentry shock. First is the initial excitement of return. The person is back home with loved ones -- relatives, friends, colleagues. The new arrival becomes the object of much attention, of pride and of excitement. The prospect of picking up one's life from where it was left off before leaving for foreign adventures is an enervating and a challenging one.

Reestablishment/frustration: Second, the initial excitement of arrival subsides as the person begins the serious business of becoming reestablished in the home environment. It is usually at this time that the returnee begins to experience irritation and frustration; it is discovered that his "natural" way of behaving and of living is in conflict with the way of life of those around him. It is also at this point that feelings of ambivalence about the wisdom of returning home begin to surface. The changes in the environment and in the social relationships that occurred during the student's absence are no longer viewed as challenges, but as threats to his well-being. When the individual feels threatened by the new roles that are thrust upon him, or feels "out-of-pace" with the lifestyles which seemed so important prior to his experience abroad, he begins to take defensive measures.

Sense of Control: Certain tactics are then employed by the student to remove the threat to his self-concept and to establish a sense of being in control over his environment. This may take the form of "scapegoating": relatives, friends, co-workers or even the society-at-large are blamed for the student's problems in readjusting to the cultural environment and for their lack of understanding and sympathy for all his difficulties. Consciously, or unconsciously, the individual attempts to change the environment in order to reduce his feelings of dissonance. Such attempts may be viewed with amusement, contempt or resistance by the other members of the group. This, in turn, reinforces the returnee's feelings of frustration. The inability to change the environment may force the student to withdraw from interaction with those around him. He may seek the company of persons of other cultures or other returnees. An extreme reaction to such frustration and conflict is a complete rejection of his own culture and an attempt to go abroad once again.



Readaptation: It may not be possible, however, to leave home again after having just returned. Thus, those who stay will, under normal circumstances, look for ways to cope with their problem of readjustment. They then move on to the fourth pattern of response: the slow and painstaking process of readaptation. They begin to realize that while they may not be able to change their own culture, they can attempt to understand and to respond to it in the light of the new knowledge about themselves and about their environment. This process of responding requires an ability and a desire to listen for the messages and the responses of those around them. They must also develop an awareness of the messages which they are sending out to others, and the interpretations which others may make of them. This is the learning phase of the reentry experience. It is also the stage where intercultural communication plays a vital role in the process of readjustment.

Intercultural communication occurs when individuals or groups form contact and exchange messages. They react to the same stimuli, but their manner of responding as well as their responses may differ because of the filtering effect of their individual cultures upon their perceptions. They communicate on the basis of presumptions made by "selves" whose perceptions are screened through differing normative systems of attitudes, values and beliefs.

A returnee who has had a significant involvement in another culture is likely to find that there are various aspects of his own communication behavior that have changed. If the returnee is aware of these changes, and of the potential reactions to such changes by others, that individual's readjustment may be eased considerably. The returnee becomes more sensitive to the cues to which he did not respond before. This phenomenon of "awareness" is not, however, as common as one would assume. Most individuals assume that they already know all there is to know about the culture in which they were born and bred. Thus, they do not suspect that difficulties may occur when reentering their old culture. They may fail to realize that their outlook on life will have been changed by their intercultural experience, and that their old culture and environment may have changed also during their absence. These unexpected changes exert a strong influence on individual reactions to their home culture. The reactions often occur at the level of "out-of-awareness." This fact contributes to the difficulty of determining the underlying cause of frustration or conflict during the reentry period.

There is evidence, however, that the problem of reentry can be minimized or controlled through proper preparation. Worrying about a potentially stressful event may force one to analyze it and to prepare for its effects. (Brislin and VanBuren, 1974.) It is important that a returnee be aware of the potential psychological and social problems that must be faced on reentering his home culture. Such problems may involve self- or cultural-identity, interpersonal relationships, role changes, professional expectations, and expectations of the society-at-large. Furthermore, the returnee should realize that the process of readjustment, though relatively painful, may lead to a new self-understanding in relation to one's culture as well as to personal growth.

Various programs have been developed to make individuals aware of the stress they may face on reentering their home cultures. The object of these programs is to provide a setting in which those who return home can analyze the special problems of reentry and prepare for them. In such an atmosphere, the returnee is encouraged to evaluate past experiences encountered in the new culture and to arrive at realistic expectations about the experience of reentry.



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Reentry into one's culture will always be a difficult experience, as are most new experiences. However, need not be threatening or stultifying. Reentry can make a promising beginning for a new outlook on one's life and culture.