



Research

# Assessing reverse culture shock following an international pharmacy practice experience

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## Abstract

**Background:** Reverse culture shock is described as the negative effects experienced while readapting to the environment of one's own culture after having spent time abroad. It is a serious condition that if left unaddressed can lead to anxiety, trouble in school, and relationship difficulties. Study abroad programs address the culture shock when traveling overseas, but many do not address the reverse culture shock.

**Methods:** This study assessed the presence of reverse culture shock symptoms and interest in re-entry programming of 17 student pharmacists returning from an eight-week clinical rotation in Kenya. Students were provided a survey regarding topics such as preparedness for reverse culture shock, symptoms of reverse culture shock, support networks available upon returning home, and desire or suggestions for reverse culture shock programming content.

**Results and Conclusion:** Of those responding, 53% reported they were at least somewhat prepared to re-enter the country. Symptoms commonly reported included experiencing feelings of loss when thinking about Kenya, believing that those who have not been overseas fail to understand them, and becoming upset with American wealth and spending. These symptoms can impact students, potentially making it harder for them in their transition to the next rotation. Nearly all the students reported having a support structure upon returning home; however, nearly all also expressed interest in some type of formal programming.

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## Introduction

When preparing a student for an overseas learning experience, a common teaching point is that of culture shock. Adapting to a new environment and lifestyle can be difficult and will often leave students with feelings of anxiety, disorientation, and discrimination that can cause an overall cultural identity crisis.<sup>1,2</sup> What is less commonly

discussed is that these emotions can also be experienced on a student's return to his or her home country.<sup>1,3</sup> The severity, however, is often greater due to lack of anticipation of their effects.<sup>2–4</sup> In fact, the above list of sentiments was taken from a recent polling of study abroad students, not on arrival to a foreign country, but on their return home.<sup>1</sup>

In 1955, a “U-curve” model was created to describe the emotional difficulties experienced during the time spent traveling abroad.<sup>5</sup> Upon arriving in a foreign country, students will experience a “honeymoon stage” in which the culture and environment are still new and exciting. However, over time, as they become aware of the

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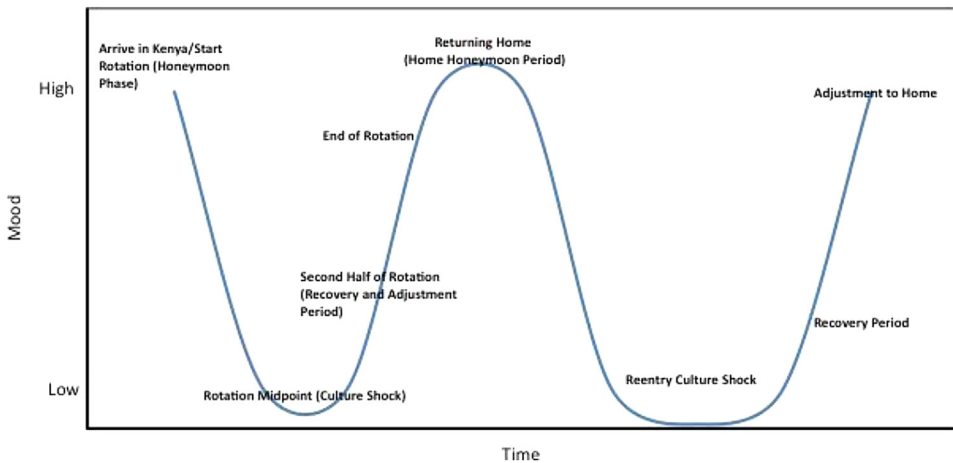


Fig. W-curve representing culture shock and reverse culture shock cycles. (Adapted from Gullahorn and Gullahorn.<sup>3</sup>)

difficulties associated with adapting to a new environment, they can become overwhelmed, frustrated, depressed, and anxious. Eventually, with prolonged exposure to the new culture, students will recover and adjust from these feelings. In 1963, this “U-curve” was extended to a “W-curve” to account for a second, potentially deeper dip in emotional state upon a student’s return to his home country (Fig.).<sup>3</sup> It was noted that upon returning home, students often found themselves disconnected from their own culture and took some time to reconnect with family and friends.<sup>3</sup> As such, reverse culture shock can be defined as the negative effects experienced while readapting to the environment of one’s own culture after having spent time abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Bruce LaBrack,<sup>7</sup> a cultural anthropologist at the University of the Pacific, describes ten major challenges that may lead to reverse culture shock (Table 1). These challenges range from simple boredom with one’s own culture to fundamental changes in behavior or values, resulting in viewing one’s home culture in a more negative light. Dr. LaBrack states students can find it difficult to apply new knowledge and skills gained overseas, creating fear they will lose or forget the important experiences they have had. Family and friends, while supportive, often

struggle to relate to the student’s experiences and may misinterpret certain changes in behavior or values as threatening or upsetting. Thus, family and friends are not as apt to provide outlets for the student to practice their newfound skills or discuss their newfound knowledge. Dr. LaBrack believes these factors can then lead to students developing feelings of alienation and loneliness.

If left unrecognized, reverse culture shock can have a major impact on students’ interpersonal relationships, physical health, memory, and ability to focus in school.<sup>1,2</sup> One survey has shown that students who return from time abroad can have poor study habits and difficulty reading assigned texts or newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Considering these factors, it is important that study abroad curriculum designers evaluate putting programs in place both to educate on reverse culture shock prior to return home and to support those who have already returned.

## Background

In 2003, the College of Pharmacy established an eight-week advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) in the rural town of Eldoret, Kenya.<sup>8</sup> The APPE, formerly entitled *Kenya Program*, was established through an already existing partnership between the Indiana University School of Medicine and the Moi University School of Medicine in Eldoret. Depending on availability, students planning to participate in the APPE are separated into groups of about four to six and placed in eight-week blocks throughout the rotation year. During the APPE, students round with medical teams at the hospital, provide drug information and clinical drug monitoring, work with Kenyan intern pharmacists, update medication administration records (i.e., “treatment sheets”), resolve out-of-stock medication issues, and observe collaborative pharmacy practice models in diabetes and anticoagulation. Along with other members of study abroad programs, students live together in a

Table 1  
Ten top challenges for returnees at home (as rated by university students)<sup>6</sup>

1.	Boredom
2.	No one wants to hear
3.	You can’t explain
4.	Reverse “homesickness”
5.	Relationships have changed
6.	People see the “wrong” changes
7.	People misunderstand
8.	Feelings of alienation/seeing with “critical eyes”
9.	Inability to apply new knowledge and skills
10.	Loss/compartimentalization of experience (“shoeboxing”)

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