# Bitter-sweet reentry after studying abroad

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## A R T I C L E   I N F O

## A B S T R A C T

This qualitative study was conducted to explore reentry experiences of U.S. college students and to provide possible explanations for those experiences. Study participants took part in a semester or year-long study abroad program organized by a Midwestern public research university and shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews and an online survey. The major finding was that the participants reported a wide range of experiences during reentry, instead of just the challenging side mostly present in the literature. This study suggests approaching reentry from a more inclusive perspective and possibly describing it as "bitter-sweet" – the phrase used by several interviewees.

The "bitter" side of the reentry was connected with students' sense of loss over the people, experiences, and cultural environment they encountered while abroad; their inability to communicate their intercultural experiences to people at home who did not have similar experiences; and developing a critical lens toward U.S. culture. These findings support the existing literature on the challenging side of reentry experiences. The "sweet" side was connected to students' reuniting with people, experiences, and elements of their home culture they missed while being abroad; communication with people who had similar intercultural experiences and could understand the need of the returnees to talk about their experiences; and developing an appreciative lens toward U.S. culture. These findings add to the very limited amount of literature on the positive side of reentry and provide explanations of those experiences that were almost lacking in the literature. Recommendations for future researchers and implications for practitioners are provided.

## 1. Introduction

Returning home after a study abroad experience might be both challenging and exciting for students. However, most of the discourse in the literature on reentry experiences of both American and international students coming back to a home culture has concentrated on the challenging side reentry. It has been loaded with such words as "problematic" (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Gaw, 2000), "shocking" (Gaw, 2000; Pritchard, 2011; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), "difficult" (Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), "grieving" (Butcher, 2002; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Pritchard, 2011), "painful" (Brabant et al., 1990), and even "traumatic" (Pritchard, 2011).

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## 1.1. Reentry challenges

These challenges have been connected to psychological and social adjustments to a home culture. Psychological challenges can range from light anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and frustration to apathy, anger, hostility, helplessness and even depression (e.g. Allison, Davis-Berman & Berman, 2011; Butcher, 2002; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Gaw, 2000; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Walling, Eriksson, Messe, Ciovica, & Gorton, 2006). According to Gaw (2000), out of 66 American students, approximately 30% reported loneliness and isolation to be either a significant or severe problem upon reentry. Other students described experiencing depression, alienation, shyness, and general anxiety. Similarly, Allison et al. (2011) noted that many students talked about isolation and loneliness after their return from abroad. Butcher (2002) discovered that students were grieving the loss of their friends and experiences from abroad. Chamove and Soeterik (2006) also indicated that out of 206 highschool students who studied abroad for one year, 66% found it frustrating to come home to New Zealand. Anger toward home culture upon reentry was one of the most commonly reported emotions among student missionaries participating in a short-term study abroad program (Walling et al., 2006).

Social challenges have mostly included returnees' relationships with parents and friends. Studies that examined relationships with parents usually reported some kind of difficulty (Butcher, 2002). Butcher (2002) pointed out that problems with family were "the norm" for the returnees (p. 359) where students reported various difficulties in meeting the expectations of their parents and subscribing to familial conventions. However, there were returnees who noticed that being away from their parents helped them appreciate their parents more which resulted in improved relationships. As for communication with friends, it seemed to be even more challenging than with parents (Martin, 1986; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). Friends seemed to be uninterested in the exciting experiences of study abroad participants, partly because they were not able to relate to it (Allison et al., 2011).

It is important to point out that these challenges have not been consistently reported in research studies. For example, Pritchard (2011) did not find evidence of reentry trauma in a psychological sense in students but reported socio-political adaptation challenges to home cultures. Similarly, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) did not find that study abroad experience interferes with social relationships upon return and that students experience more negative emotions than those who did not study abroad. However, they found that students who studied abroad scored significantly higher on a Reentry Shock scale, reflecting skepticism toward U.S. culture, than those who did not study abroad. Brabant et al. (1990) suggested that reentry culture shock might not be universal because their participants did not report severe problems upon returning home. These studies indicate that psychological and social challenges are just general tendencies in the reentry experiences of students and need further exploration.

Interestingly, by mostly concentrating on reporting a variety of reentry challenges, the current literature has almost neglected the positive side of reentry. There are just a small number of studies that mention it. For example, Chamove and Soeterik (2006) reported that over one-third (39%) of students found it "easy" or "very easy" to come home but did not explain in detail what students meant by their answers. Brown and Graham (2009) noted that students viewed study abroad experience as removal from routine and transfer to a new role, where they described themselves as more "culturally aware", "independent", "confident", and "assertive" after studying abroad. Pritchard (2011) examined the re-acculturation of Taiwanese and Sri Lankan graduates after study in the West and reported that students found "comfort" in returning to a home culture where they felt a sense of belonging. Walling et al. (2006) mentioned that some students (15%) developed an appreciation of home culture upon return and reflected on personal growth. Personal growth, however, was accompanied by students starting to question their belonging to a home culture and looking for a new purpose in life.

It is understandable that returning home after having new and exciting experiences might be challenging both psychologically and socially. At the same time, the changes that students experience due to these intercultural experiences can result in some positive experiences, mostly disregarded in the current literature. Therefore, the current study has been designed to approach students' reentry experiences from a variety of perspectives and propose a wider lens to understand these experiences.

## 1.2. Explanations for reentry challenges

Various explanations have been proposed by researchers to shed light on why it might be so challenging, psychologically and socially, to come back home from a study abroad experience. The most common general explanations include the following: feeling of loss related to experiences abroad; communication problems with family and friends who are not able to relate to students' intercultural experiences; and changes in cultural identities as a result of studying abroad and an inability to comprehend those changes.

Several researchers indicated that sojourners might experience loss when they leave their new friends, experiences, and the lifestyle they adopted while abroad. For example, Butcher (2002) compared reentry to a grieving process because students were grieving the loss of friends, experiences, and the way of life they had while studying abroad. Chamove and Soeterik (2006) studied New Zealand high school students and found that some reentry students experienced the loss of cultural experience comparable to that of those recently bereaved.

Communication problems seemed to be connected to the inability of friends and families to relate to new experiences of returnees (Allison et al., 2011; Butcher, 2002; Cushner & Brislin, 1997; Gaw, 2000). Cushner and Brislin (1997) noticed that parents' and friends' lack of interest in listening to their stories from abroad created feelings of disappointment and