Happily Ever Aftershock?
A Journey from Reverse Culture Shock to New Identity

by

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Today, with countless study abroad programs available, students have the opportunity to travel and study all over the world. Those who are lucky enough to study abroad are able to embark on an international journey that will change their life forever. This thesis expands on what happens after returning home after such an enlightening experience (socially, academically, and psychologically). Despite what popular, prior models illustrate, I argue that a study abroad experience doesn’t end at the “reintegration” stage. Therefore, I submit my own model adapted from Peter Alder’s (1975) “transitional experience” representation, which combines his final stages of “Autonomy” and “Independence” into a singular category, that I title “New Identity.” It is important for study abroad students to understand this cross-cultural adjustment when returning home in order to successfully recognize and identify how they have changed in addition to how it will affect them in the future.
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CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is said to be the experience of a lifetime, and I can tell you that it is true. After studying abroad in three locations, and two countries, I have, like all study abroad students, had the opportunity to experience life through a new cultural lens and gain new understandings about the world and myself, but it didn’t stop there. After returning from studying abroad, I experienced reverse culture shock, or the emotional and psychological transition of reintegration into one’s home culture and society.

It is my goal to give an overview of the existing cross-cultural adjustment models in a study abroad context, and pinpoint the area that I believe is lacking in research and concentration. As a whole, reverse culture shock is an important field of study that is limited in published research. Every student experiences a level of shock returning home and despite whatever level is felt, it is nonetheless a shock returning to a different culture after a period of personal growth and education abroad spent in another.

Today, there are countless study abroad programs that offer opportunities for students to travel and study all over the world. Students have the ability to search through thousands of these programs in the hopes of choosing the one that will change their lives forever and facilitate a welcoming environment to new experiences and adventures. According to the 2014 Open Doors Report, 289,408 American students studied abroad during the 2012/13 academic year – a record high! (Institute of International Education, Inc., 2015). For each of these 289,408 study abroad students, it is important for them to understand the elements of the transitional process after one returns home in order to successfully recognize and identify what has changed in themselves in addition to how it will affect them in the future.

Specifically in this thesis, I elaborate on what happens after reverse culture shock. Despite what popular, prior models illustrate, a study abroad experience doesn’t end at the
“reintegration” stage; therefore, I submit my own model adapted from Peter Alder’s (1975) “transitional experience” representation, which encapsulates his stages of “Autonomy” and “Independence” in a singular category, that I title “New Identity.”
2.1 Studying Abroad and the U/W- Curve Hypothesis

First, to understand reverse culture shock, one must understand culture shock. According to La Brack (2010), “culture shock” is described as “the physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions that often occur when individuals are attempting to live, work, or study in unfamiliar cultural contexts” (p. 1). When experiencing a culture shock, one may feel a range of unfamiliar emotions that are foreign to the participant. Key figures regarding culture shock research include Cora DuBois, Ruth Benedict, and Kalvero Olberg. La Brack (2010) highlights DuBois as the first to “publicly use the term ‘culture shock’” in 1951 and speculates that Benedict “may have been the original source” (p.1). Furthermore, the expansion of the term (away from anthropologists experiencing different cultures) is accredited to Kalvero Oberg in 1954, who linked “culture shock” to all who “travel abroad into new cultures” (La Brack, 2010, p. 1). Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman (2012) list anthropologist Oberg’s “six components of CS (culture shock)” as:

1. psychological strain;
2. sense of loss and feeling of deprivation;
3. feelings of rejection by the new culture;
4. confusion in role expectation, values and feelings;
5. surprise and anxiety at realization of cultural differences;
6. feelings of impotence at inability to cope with, or integrate into the new environment. (p. 490)

Although there may be positive and surprising reactions when encountering something new, the more negative components listed above are more common when one first thinks of
what “culture shocks” entail. The following stages after experiencing a culture shock incorporate adjustment and adaptation to the new environment and culture. La Brack (2010) highlights how both “the “U” and “W” curves of adjustment models emerged and evolved alongside the “culture shock” concept, usually accompanied by visual illustrations that proposed to describe and even predict a “typical” trajectory that such stressful encounters would produce” (p. 1). Below, I explain these models and how they attempt to encapsulate the timeline of an individual’s cross-cultural adjustment.

**The U-Curve**

The U-Curve is the original cross-cultural adjustment model for study abroad students to track their transitional process while abroad (although it can be used for anyone experiencing cross-cultural adjustment) (Figure 1). Sverre Lysgaard, a Norwegian sociologist, created the iconic model in 1955 and since then, it has stood as the inspiration on which other models have been expanded (La Brack, 2010, p. 1). It begins with one’s arrival, swoops down to track a “settling in” process, and returns to curve back upwards to mark the end, and final adjustment into a new culture.

![Fig. 1—The generic U-Curve pattern of adjustment (Modified from Lysgaard, 1955).](image-url)
In my experience, programs focus on this part of the curve (the ‘U’ shape) in order to prepare them for impending culture shock. For a more detailed look at the full picture, there is another model.

The W-Curve

Figure 2 shows the W-Curve, an expansion of the U-Curve, which acts as a more complete model to what a study abroad student can expect to encounter from the initial stage of entering a new culture to exiting and returning home. When experiencing an unfamiliar culture shock, students tend to drop to the dip in the curve and as they work through the shock of it, they begin the journey to adaptation.

![W-Curve: Stages of Transition Shock](image)

**Fig. 2** – W-Curve: Stages of Transition Shock (Modified from Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963).
Implications

La Brack (2010) succinctly addresses how “In short, “curves” have not withstood critical empirical testing and research” (p. 1). It’s plain to see how the U-Curve model is rather limited—“[it] has been on trial now for almost 40 years” (La Brack, 2010, p. 2). Although the “culture shock” aspect is definitely relevant, “the models, as they [stand], [do] not capture either the apparent “messiness” and unpredictability of the process, nor [do] they account for cases where it appear[s] that the stages [do] not occur in order, [are] frequently repeated, [seem] compressed or blended, or [are] absent altogether” (La Brack, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, both the U-Curve and its expansion, the W-Curve, are subject to much controversy within research regarding what individuals should expect when experiencing culture shock for the first time and what the conclusion stages entail.

Figure 3 is a variation of the U/W-Curve, which I regard as a more accurate representation of the stages of transition shock for study abroad students. Although all U/W-Curve models are up for subjective interpretation, I believe Figure 3 acts as a more complete representation of what students actually experience while abroad. In both W-Curve models, the final stages of “Reintegration” and “Balanced Readaptation” are positioned at a neutral level (in regards to the full range of levels shown), but I feel as if the dips and sub-stages noted in Figure 3 sets it apart as the better model. Although Figure 2 may simply be more general, I believe it is important to have as many transitional phases determined as possible, to account for the stress and difficulties these periods may be for study abroad students.
But what does “Balanced Readaptation” really mean? Throughout this thesis, I stress that the final stage of a study abroad experience is the most important to one’s self-identification. In my opinion, the U/W-Curve models (along with the improved W-Curve variation model) do not address this final stage at all, leading the individual into a vaguely defined transitional phase they must define on their own.

The Y-Axis

Lastly, another important aspect to these models is how they address their respective Y-axis. For the U-Curve, the Y-axis marks an individual’s overall “Well-being” in regards to culture shock whereas the W-Curve labels its Y-axis as one’s “Sense of Satisfaction.” The former can be interpreted more generally as the comfort of a study abroad student’s state of mind or health whereas the latter is more closely linked to an
individual’s specific and personal feelings regarding satisfaction. The W-Curve Variation Model lacks a Y-axis entirely.

2.2 Reverse Culture Shock and Reintegration

In my experience, the final days in a study abroad (either short-term or long-term) creep up unexpectedly. All of a sudden, the student is thrown back into a past culture that may now seem foreign. The student is overburdened with questions such as: “Why is everything different?” and “Where do I go from here?” These questions arise when one is tackling reverse culture shock. Kevin Gaw (2000) defines reverse culture shock as “the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (p. 2). It can be experienced in different levels (low, moderate, high), but in my opinion, no matter the differing factors (how immersed you were, how long a time spent abroad, etc), every student will return home with some sort of shock (even those who are homesick and eager to return to something familiar).

Shock is seen even in the simplest things. I remember returning to Oregon after a year and a half in Australia and being surprised to see motion-activated hand towel dispensers, not realizing I hadn’t seen them during the entirety of my time spent studying abroad. Other routine behaviors like food shopping and driving (I only drove into the opposing traffic lane once!) seemed out-of-the-ordinary because the same norms and availability of items were not the same as how I had been living. Another large transition for many study abroad students incorporates language. I have encountered many people who think of Australians as having a parallel culture to Americans, simply because of shared language, but this is not true at all.

Whether one leaves a country with something as skin-deep and trivial as a tan, or as deep as adopting a new meaning of life, this experience is an opportunity to gain another view on the world from another perspective (Gisolf, 2013). Study abroad students often form new
identities and gain new insights, if s/he has the courage to embrace the new culture. Even if students stay within an American subgroup, they will still have something new to gain from this experience. It may be as minor as opening one’s eyes to new slang, food, or drinking culture, yet these differences aid in personal development and how one relates themselves to their original home culture.

These cultural differences shape one’s identity, resulting in problems when one is forced to reintegrate back into their home culture after opening themselves up and adopting another.

2.3 Victor Turner’s Concept of “Liminality”

Arnold van Gennep was a French ethnographer who theorized about “ritual process[es]” (for example, rites of passage ceremonies) and how they can be separated into three levels. They are as follows: “‘separation’ from the group, ‘transition’ to a new state (referred to as “liminality” or “liminal period”), and ‘incorporation’ (more properly thought of as ‘re-incorporation’) within the social order” (Erickson & Murphy, 2013, p.121). British anthropologist Victor Turner gave new insight to this concept, especially that of “liminality,” or the ambiguous transitional stages that are seen in rituals. Expanding on this structure, Turner melded together van Gennep’s three stages of “liminality” alongside the Durkheimian understanding of ritual (via solidarity) to create a new approach to conceptualizing the ritual process altogether. In this, it was Turner’s belief that “rituals generate a liminal period in which all notions of social ‘structure’ are undone through the physical and symbolic separation of certain individuals from society” (Erickson & Murphy, 2013, p. 122). Here, Turner identifies this theory of “liminality” as a state of being “betwixt and between,” where the individual exists outside of their original society (Erickson & Murphy, 2012, p. 121). For instance, Turner’s expanded theory applies to many current traditions, or rituals today, which include, but are not limited to: tourism, immigration, gender identity, graduations, and coming-of-age ceremonies. These transitional periods are in
many ways integral in an individual’s identity formation and personal growth. By taking the ritual of graduation for example, one could highlight the liminal period as the state in which an individual leaves an institution and enters a period of disorientation regarding what’s in store for them next.

To link this concept of “liminality” to study abroad students, take tourism into account. In many ways, study abroad students are long-term tourists. Indeed, there is an academic element to studying abroad, but there are also many elements of the study abroad experience that center around what makes up a tourist and tourist behavior. In this chapter, I expand on the three stages of the ritual process: separation, “liminality”, and re-assimilation, in regards to study abroad students as tourists.

**Separation**

For the typical study abroad student, the separation phase includes choosing a study abroad destination, program, preparing for the impending journey, and the final step of stepping onto the plane, leaving one’s home country behind. In the process of choosing a destination, study abroad students acknowledge their particular interest in a new country along with its unique culture, food, landscape, language, etc. Once the program is chosen, the student prepares to leave their home country, in order to not only advance their education, but to experience things through a different cultural lens; therefore, gaining such qualities as: newfound confidence, maturity, and independence. In order to reach this level though, the study abroad student must separate himself/herself from his/her home culture completely.
Liminal Period

After being stripped from past cultural ties, the study abroad student enters the liminal period. According to Gisolf (2013), there are many aspects to being in the liminal period or transitional phase for tourists. He explains that hierarchical and social structures do not exist in this period, which leads to people's “social differences [being] de-emphasized,” and therefore equalized – resulting in solidarity (Gisolf, 2013). Think back to Turner’s idea of “betwixt and between.” In addition, Gisolf (2013) states that during this period of “liminality,” there is a “liberation of social constraints [that] opens up possibilities for a more authentic self with higher levels of self-expression and spontaneity” (Gisolf, 2013). For study abroad students, these feelings of independence and freedom of self-expression act as a marker for adventures taken abroad and unfortunately at times, can result in students making more risky decisions. In my experience, I was influenced by the carpe diem mentality to “seize every opportunity” while abroad. In this, I felt separated from my identity as an American, and was able to immerse myself in Australian cultural events and norms. In the liminal period, I felt like a sponge, able to soak up every new culture shock and learn about differing views and ideas from inside a culture that wasn’t my own.

Re-assimilation

Transitioning back to one’s home culture poses a lot of new problems. For example, many study abroad students find independence and new identities while in their host country, so it’s not hard to assume that when students return, they have difficulties adjusting. For instance, all study abroad students, no matter their living situation (independent housing, dorms, or host family) can return feeling constrained, confused, and lonely.
A common side effect of reverse culture shock is to have the feeling that “no one understands what it was like [to study abroad and be thrown back into a home culture].” This is why it is important to understand the transitional process from living in “liminality” to re-integrating oneself back into home culture. At a basic level, one must realize that time hasn’t stopped for the family and friends who stayed in the home country. It’s easy to fall into this type of thinking because when study abroad students travel somewhere new, they are constantly surrounded by things that are unfamiliar, on a daily basis. For me, it was a complete shock every day in Australia to hear huge cockatoos squawking, see wallabies hopping, bush turkeys scurrying, and possums climbing all around campus—rather than seeing crows and/or squirrels. The amount of culture shock that one feels when in a new country seems impossible to compare/relate to what anyone else has experienced, other than one’s study abroad companions.

Studying abroad encourages students to break out of their shell and take every opportunity for adventure, because for many, this experience is a sort of once-in-a-lifetime extended academic vacation. The dates are final and eventually, students will return to their home universities. When one embarks on a journey abroad, they say goodbye to their familiar crutches (i.e., longtime family and friends) in the hopes of discovering a new way of life, identity, academic niche, or simply a new adventure. In this, students meet new people, make new connections, and grow. Simply by trying, learning, and experiencing new things from a new perspective can result in personal and even professional growth. Returning and adapting back into society can be challenging because one doesn’t return as the same person who left.

2.4 Assumptions and Expectations
The assumptions and expectations from study abroad students are important to address before the separation one experiences when leaving their home culture. If one’s assumptions and expectations do not line up with reality, the resulting impacts may cause more of a shock than necessary. I believe that by previous, preparatory education about impending cultural differences, new acceptances can be made and result in a more comfortable transition from culture shock to adaptation. Then again, this is not always the case. Supporting this notion, Stewart and Leggat (1998) state, “The prevention and management of culture shock is an important part of pretravel assessment and preparation…[in addition to] debriefing and posttravel counseling for those returning from working or traveling abroad” (p. 88). Below, I give a brief film analysis that highlights how one’s original path can be altered unexpectedly, leading an individual to embrace a new path, along with a new identity. In my opinion, the personal characteristic that proves the most beneficial when entering a new culture is open-mindedness to what the country and its inhabitants have to offer.

L’Auberge Espagnole

_L’Auberge Espagnole_ (2002) or “The Spanish Apartment” (in English) is a French-Spanish collaborative film produced by Bruno Levy and directed by Cédric Klapisch. It centers around the life of Xavier, a young French graduate student who leaves on the ERASMUS Programme (a European Union student exchange programme) to study in Barcelona, Spain for a year. Leaving his girlfriend, mother and country behind, he finds an apartment with six other students from varying countries in Europe (Spain, Denmark, Italy, England, Germany, and Belgium). Together, they work and struggle (through both the good times and bad), growing together as they handle new cultural and lingual differences. The apartment itself represents a sort of microcosm of the European Union, with each character embodying their country of origin. There are two moments in which I
believe this film completely captured the feelings students have in relation to their new surroundings when studying abroad and returning home. First, Xavier describes his first moments in Barcelona:

> When you first arrive in a new city, nothing makes sense. Everything's unknown, virgin... After you've lived here, walked these streets, you'll know them inside out. You'll know these people. Once you've lived here, crossed this street 10, 20, 1000 times... it'll belong to you because you've lived there. That was about to happen to me, but I didn't know it yet. (Levy & Klapisch, 2002, 14:50)

![Fig. 4—Xavier’s first day walking around the streets of Barcelona (14:50)](image)

Once I arrived at each of my three study abroad locations, I had the same reaction as Xavier. At arrival, everything was fresh and new, but after my first day, I made memories that marked my daily routine. The streets, bus stops, shopping centers, etc.
that seemed unfamiliar at first became comfortable in the end, making it feel almost wrong to leave. Study abroad students have the ability not only to connect with local establishments and people, but also to understand how they fit into a new culture. It is this realization that allows students to make a new home in new surroundings.

This film tackles a variety of personal challenges, including: identity, stereotyping, and multiculturalism; common themes that exist in a study abroad student’s journey. In this case, after Xavier’s time spent abroad, he experiences reverse culture shock in a memorable way, which is cinematically unexpected. In the final scenes, Xavier both dramatically (and literally) runs away on his first day at a corporate job in France that he was working toward the whole film. He feels as if his experiences abroad have made him a different person entirely; therefore, changing his original outlook on life and his future. He encapsulates this feeling in the final scene, reflecting back to himself and his new identity saying, “I'm French, Spanish, English, Danish. I'm not one, but many. I'm like Europe, I'm all that. I'm a real mess” (Levy & Klapisch, 2002, 1:57:23). Additionally, he links himself to his new friends and acquaintances—going back and forth saying “I’m him” and “I’m her” (Levy & Klapisch, 2002, 1:56:51).
In my opinion, this final scene sums up reverse culture shock very well. I believe it was the stylistic choice of the director to visually and figuratively use the breaking up and combining of multiple shots (Figure 5) and Xavier’s mess of pictures (Figure 6) to allude to the relevance of a cultural identity reflecting a mosaic/collage. Before studying abroad, one’s identity is fully made up of their home culture, yet after traveling, studying, and possibly working abroad, one has a dual (or multiple) identity.

2.5 “Home” and Family

The term “home” refers not only to one’s place of residence, but also to the notions of security, stability and comfort (Mooradian, 2004, p. 44). For instance, when one talks about their home, or hometown, it is usually linked to a nostalgic and personal feeling. In the past, it was most common for many people’s traveling adventures to only go as far as the beach or nearby hotspot, but that has changed. Although people still take these sorts of day or weekend trips, for
a brief escape with family and/or friends, it is becoming more and more popular to travel outside the U.S. (or one’s respective country) for education and enjoyment. For these world travelers, “home” doesn’t have the same simplicity in meaning as it is defined in a dictionary. The same goes for study abroad students. It’s a common notion to think that when one returns home, things will be the same, and that stable environment will still exist. Unexpectedly, in many instances, that is not the case. For example, Bethany L. Mooradian (2004) addresses reverse culture shock and re-entry in relation to this feeling of belonging…or rather, the absence of, stating, “After living abroad, home does not feel like home” (p. 40). Furthermore, Siebender (1988) explains in the article “Re-entry: A family crisis” that “Many people feel like they are lost in time” (qtd. in Mooradian, 2004, p. 43). This disorienting feeling confirms that one’s home is not static; it is an ever-changing ideal.

Returning home can be challenging for study abroad students, especially when they see all the changes that occurred, not just in the lives of their friends and loved ones, but in the culture itself. Gaw (2000) affirms this expectation, explaining that, “The returnee expects no difficulties as he/she is returning home… expect[ing] the home culture to have remained unchanged and welcoming” (p. 7). This realization that one’s home may not seem like home anymore is important for one’s cultural identity. Whether it’s the people in one’s life, cultural slang, music, or a multitude of other things, one has to come to grips with the changes, whether expected or not. This marks the beginning of cross-cultural adjustment back into one’s home culture.

Returning home can also pose challenges for both the family and friends of study abroad students. In the following chapter, I discuss coping mechanisms for those involved.

2.6 How Best to Cope with Reverse Culture Shock

According to Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, and Lassegard (2006), “Undoubtedly [after such an experience, one feels] a range of emotions: regret, bewilderment at where the time
went, excitement about seeing family and friends, numbness, concern about what's next, satisfaction about all you have seen and enjoyed, and even a sense of loss” (p. 143). These emotions may be overwhelming at first, but it is important to remember to take everything one step at a time. In this, coping with reverse culture shock can still be difficult. I restate that the common notion of “no one understands” (aside from possibly those who were closely involved in one’s study abroad experience) makes readjustment challenging. In many cases, I have seen people struggle returning home from time spent abroad due to this communication failing. For instance, some students fear that their friends from home will be “tired” and “annoyed” by their stories from abroad. These reactions could be because “there is not enough time to learn everything about the sojourner’s experience, jealousy, or a person may have a short attention span” (Mooradian, 2004, p. 44). In response to these reactions, the returnee storyteller may become hurt and therefore, feel more left out or separated from a group or friendship they once fit so well in. I have been able to experience this personally. Even though I would love to spend hours blathering on about how I was able to see beautiful parrot fish at the Great Barrier Reef and feed rock wallabies on Magnetic Island, many of my friends haven’t been lucky enough to have an experience that they can use to relate. This pushes many students like myself to hold back and internalize a lot of stories in fear that they will bore their friends from home.

To cope with these varying emotions, one can seek out professional help to facilitate the debriefing of returning to one’s past culture. In my experience, these sort of debriefing sessions may be mentioned by study abroad programs, but are not required upon return to one’s university. In this, many students rely on themselves to self-adjust back into their home culture. In Gaw’s (2000) research paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, he explains “The returnees with higher levels of reverse culture shock used fewer services than did returnees with low levels of reverse culture shock… [which] suggests that their reverse culture shock experience may have been a serious inhibitor in their reaching out for professional help” (p. 23). In my opinion, this correlation between the shock of returning home
and the individual only stresses that a mandatory debriefing session would be beneficial to those returning after a stint spend abroad.

In the end, the only thing returnees can hope after returning from another country is the comfort, support, and acceptance of their own, new identity from the friends and family around them. On this point, I believe that it would also be beneficial for the families of study abroad students to be informed about what it will be like for the returning student. In many cases, students return with a newfound independence from living independently so returning to a life under the roof of their parent’s house will be an overwhelming shock. If the parents are prepared, they will be able to adjust themselves and their environment in order to facilitate a smoother transition, resulting in better communication and re-assimilation with the student.

2.7 Eide’s Theory of “Students as Culture Carriers”

Norwegian sociologist Ingrid Eide (1970) discusses the concept of “culture carrying” in her article, “Students as Culture Carriers” (p. 166). Here, the “student’s role as a link between cultures—or…his function as a channel of communication, a channel through which a message can pass” is important to study in order to better understand the complex study of culture carrying (p. 167). Figure 7 shows Eide’s (1970) model distinguishing the four different “communication lines” that exist between the home culture, student, and host culture (p. 167).

![Fig. 7—“Communication Lines” Model (Eide, 1970)](image-url)
The first line of communication exists between the home culture and the student. At this communication level, the student acts as a representative of their home culture and country (by means of values and “concrete knowledge”) (Eide, 1970, p. 167). Next, the communication line travels from the student to the host culture. Eide (1970) explains that at this level, “the idea is that the student shall receive knowledge and give insight into his own culture” (p. 167). The third line of communication goes from the host culture to the student and signifies the host culture “implant[ing] some of its cultural elements in the student [in addition to] assum[ing] that he takes responsibility for the fourth communication line, and disseminates these elements to his home country upon his return” (p. 168). Taking into account the transition that the student experiences: i.e., leaving one culture, entering another, and finally returning to the original, supports the idea that the student will have undergone a variety of changes while learning something new about their own culture (from a new perspective), their host culture (via immersion), or themselves. Therefore, learning and growing in an experience abroad will transform an individual's personal identity.
CHAPTER 3 METHODS

To analyze reverse culture shock and the models used to convey the process of cross-cultural adjustment back into a prior culture, research primarily consisted of cross-referencing published work on related topics. Google Scholar was used as my principal resource search engine in addition to Oregon State University’s 1Search. Some key terms utilized in my research process would include: culture shock, reverse culture shock (after studying abroad), re-entry, tourism and study abroad, U and W-Curve models, and acculturation. Along with my research, I utilized my own personal accounts of reverse culture shock after returning home from three study abroad programs altogether equaling two years away from my home culture.

In the midst of my research, I decided to create my own model that not only replaces the U-Curve model (and W-Curve model by extension), but also improves it. To do this, I drew up prototypes that were inspired by Peter Adler’s (1975) “Transitional Experience” representation. This is a list of stages, which highlights an individual’s journey through a transitional phase (and in this case, relates to a study abroad student’s experience). It is as follows: Contact – Disintegration – Reintegration – Autonomy – Independence (p. 16-18).

Secondly, I tested my model against Kate Berardo’s (2007) four considerations:

1. Emphasize the ‘why’ of adjustment challenges, not just the ‘what.’
2. Avoid the ‘stage’ approach of emotional adjustment.
3. Hold with the complexity of adjustment and allow for non-universal reactions to being abroad.
4. Cater to various learning styles and needs. (p. 11-12)

This method of utilizing published research along with my own experience is valid for exploring the troubles of reverse culture shock for students today.
4.1 The Birth of a Model

Most figures that depict the process of a study abroad experience utilize a linear path both starting and ending at a neutral emotional level. This may be true, that one may start a journey happily and after adjusting home may also settle at a happy state, but I believe that a model ending with a readjustment phase is too simplified, and therefore, misleading. For those who suffer reverse culture shock, that feeling of coming home is laced with many different layers of confusion. Although one is returning to friends, family, and familiar surroundings, it’s common to feel puzzled and in many cases, lonely because no one, apart from those who were on the journey with the student (and this still may be debatable), understands what the experience fully entailed –academically, socially and psychologically.

The Acculturation Model

I titled my representation of the transitional experience of the study abroad student, the “Acculturation Model,” inspired by the term “acculturation” itself. Berry (2003) explains how “acculturation has evolved from a unidimensional concept of assimilation, such as the American melting-pot model, to a complex concept of biculturalism or cultural identity involving multiple factors (qtd. in Ndika, 2013, p. 1). Here, in the multidimensional course of acculturation exists two levels: macro and micro. The macro-level includes “factors such as the cultural and institutional patterns of the host environment and the ethnic community within it [whereas the] micro-level factors [include] the backgrounds and psychological characteristics of individuals” (Kim, 2001, p.
30). It is crucial to analyze both of these levels “if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation process” (Kim, 2001, p. 30).

4.2 Model Review

The Acculturation Model is not to be another variation of the W-Curve model. As shown below, my model is set up as a process. The first part (Figure 8) generally shows an arrival period, followed by a settling-in period. Here, the individual, through new adaptations and transitions, learn how to fit into a new culture and surrounding area. During this settling-in period, I show that there are many culture shocks that can be experienced by the student. Represented as bubbles, I list three potential and highly likely culture shocks/differences that study abroad students could expect. They include: food, language, and mannerisms. These bubbles may seem general, but they can branch off into many sub-categories. For instance, take food. The initial culture shock in this category could be expressed as, “I haven’t tasted/eaten food like this before” and after one becomes familiar with the new cuisine, one can deduce their likes and dislikes. As I explained, these likes/dislikes can spider out into a multitude of smaller shocks, which then are filtered into one’s individual experience. For instance, through weekly errands, many students have the chance to go shopping on their own, highlighting the differences and availabilities in food products and how one conducts their shopping. In order to appeal to the range of study abroad students, the amount of culture shocks (bubbles) are variable and can either increase or decrease, catering to each student’s unique experience.
In the second part of the process (Figure 9), the student returns home, readapting and readjusting to life in their home country. Differing from the existing models, I believe I have included a very important final element. Whereas the previous models end with a state of successful re-assimilation, noting visually, the point in which one is once again comfortable in their home culture, I end, explaining that by combining one’s home culture, host culture, in addition to all the experienced culture shocks, a “New Identity” is formed. In this category, I have combined Adler’s two additional stages (Autonomy and Independence) to make up the student’s “New Identity.” Although I don’t agree with the linear structure of the prior models, the second
part of the Acculturation Process was created to act as a continuum onto what happens after the “readjustment” period.

![Diagram of the Acculturation Process](image)

**Fig. 9**—The Acculturation Process—Part 2 (Adapted from Peter Alder)

Unfortunately, the majority of students are introduced to either the U or W-Curve models. The problem with introducing these linear models before students begin their study abroad journey is that it leads the individual to expect to reach a certain adjustment level upon returning home. I believe this expectation is a false representation. Study abroad students experiencing reverse culture shock generally return confused and overwhelmed. How are students expected to reach a level of re-assimilation into a home culture that they feel they no longer are a part of?

The image of a cone filter is used to represent the blending together of all experiences from both home and host culture, combining them with the many experienced culture shocks...
that contribute to the formation of a new identity. The reason why I believe the Acculturation Model is superior to others is that it visually represents a cycle of progression for an individual instead of a stage-approach that leads them back to an ambiguous prior state.

Figure 10 shows the Acculturation Model in its final form.

![The Acculturation Process](image)

**Fig. 10**—The Acculturation Model- Final Form (Adapted from Peter Alder)

### 4.3 Trial I

In order to test my model for accuracy and relevance in regards to study abroad students, I addressed Berardo’s (2007) four considerations for “improving, not just replacing the
U-Curve” and argue how my model holds up against her criticisms. My arguments are as follows:

1. **Emphasize the ‘why’ of adjustment challenges, not just the ‘what.’**
   a. The Acculturation Model includes something that the existing models lack— a final position that concludes with the returnee’s new identity. This ‘New Identity’ highlights ‘why’ people suffer adjustment challenges, instead of simply stating the common struggles students face upon returning home. To answer the question, “Why is readjustment hard?” the Acculturation Model counters with the fact that readjustment it is directly linked to one’s ever-changing identity.

2. **Avoid the ‘stage’ approach of emotional adjustment.**
   a. Whereas the ‘stage’ approach implies emotional adjustment that occurs one after the other, the Acculturation Model utilizes a process of progression for the individual to mark their transitional experience.

3. **Hold with the complexity of adjustment and allow for non-universal reactions to being abroad.**
   a. Everyone’s identity is complex and multi-faceted. In this, one’s “New Identity” allows the model to cater to a broad range of individuals. Additionally, by getting rid of the linear model and omitting its calculated number of highs and lows in one’s study abroad experience, individuals are encouraged to incorporate their unique experiences into the Acculturation Model.

4. **Cater to various learning styles and needs. (p. 11-12)**
   a. As stated above, the Acculturation Model acts as a general, visual representation that marks the transitional process of a study abroad experience.
CHAPTER 5  DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

5.1 Highlighting “New Identity”

Peter Adler’s (1975) model is titled, “The Transitional Experience” and is defined as a movement to delve deeper into the implications of cross-cultural experiences on an individual. The model "suggests that specific psychological, social, and cultural dynamics occur when new cultures are encountered …[and also] implies that a successful cross-cultural experience should result in the movement of personality and identity to new consciousness of values, attitudes, and understandings” (p. 15). Alder (1975) takes the individual through the following stages: Contact – Disintegration – Reintegration – Autonomy – Independence. In my opinion, the U/W-Curve models are lacking simply because they stop analysis at ‘reintegration’, whereas Alder’s model incorporates two additional stages (Autonomy and Independence). These two stages are incredibly important and vital for any proper analysis of reverse culture shock. As Alder (1975) states, “the transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self” (p. 18). I branch off this idea and adapt Alder’s theory into my own visual representation of what comes after ‘Reintegration’ (Figure 7). My diagram, the Acculturation Model, zooms in on the ending phase of the U/W-Curve models and combines Alder’s stages of ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Independence’ into what I call, “New Identity.”

The Acculturation Model highlights this journey to a new identity. Therefore, ‘reintegration’ isn’t the forefront of what students should be striving for, but instead, it is the comfort of embracing one’s new identity. In many senses, the terms ‘re-entry’, ‘reintegration’, and ‘re-assimilation’ have a definition that stresses the process of “returning back,” which I believe is deceptive. Study abroad students are not in fact on that sort of linear path, but
continue to progress in life as they acquire more and more knowledge and grow in their beliefs and ideas. One cannot return to the past. One can only keep moving forward.

5.2 Other Representations

In the course of my research, I also found some humorous representations of the frustrations associated with illustrating reverse culture shock as a model via blog posts. Below are some of the proposed models:

Like all original models, the U-Curve has its major drawbacks. In order to combat the many criticisms, Maria Foley (2012) created a blog post titled, "U-Curve? Maybe not" where she stresses how the model "doesn’t stand up to scrutiny…[although] to be fair, Lysgaard never intended it to be taken as gospel –it was a hypothesis that cried out for further research." The complexity of every individual’s transitional experience is impossible to fit into a singular mould, which is the main reason the Acculturation Model in many ways, seems very general. Foley (2012) continues, stating that “the path we take to adjustment depends on many factors: our feelings and expectations about the move, the extent of difference between two cultures, the amount of social support available…[and even] personality.” The way an individual adapts and integrates into another culture is completely unique, and independent of time. Foley (2012) indicates her frustrations with the U-Curve model in her scribbled representation of cultural integration into a “messy, unpredictable beast with a timeline all its own” (Figure 11).
In an surprising way, this scribbled diagram captures the aggravation and conflicting feelings that arise when returning home as well as grasping the fact that progression and readjustment are completely dependent on the individual, and not time.

The next representation highlights the number and frequency of experienced culture shocks that an individual encounters. Allison McCue (2013) drew up this model (Figure 12) to stress that “the whole experience feels much more up and down rather than smoothly curving through sequential stages.” Not only does she believe that the existing models (which she calls the “normal curve”) are “too simplified,” but she goes as far as to say that “it’s starting to get a little annoying.” This is where the U/W-Curve models fall short. Rather than embracing an approach (like the Acculturation Model) to encourage individuality, the U/W-Curve models set a strict precedent (with only a few dips and a step-by-step path) that few individuals feel they can follow. This can lead individuals to feel that they are failing to adjust because they do not live up to the standard “correctly.”
The final representation, titled “The Real Culture Shock Curve” was posted by MelStarKicker (2014) and shows a mix of overlain arrows atop a general representation of the W curve (Figure 13). In this, MelStarKicker’s (2014) alterations suggest that the popular, linear models should again, be abandoned. Along with this, MelStarKicker (2014) describes the model as “more of a sliding/slipping/tripping/falling scale” of culture shock. Additionally, this model also supports the idea that time should be seen as “irrelevant” in regards to adjusting or readjusting to cultures.
All in all, each of the culture shock representations above reinforces my reasons behind creating the Acculturation Model. The alterations and choices I made focus on catering to the unique and personal experiences every individual has in analyzing their transitional process. Therefore, major flaws such as setting a standard number for culture shocks and placing significance on time are averted.

Fig. 13—“The Real Culture Shock Curve” (MelStarKicker, 2014)
CHAPTER 6 LIMITATIONS/FUTURE STUDY

There were a few limitations that arose during the course of writing this thesis. Mainly, there is a lack of published works that cover reverse culture shock in depth. What I gathered from my research is that reverse culture shock is touched upon in relation to subjects such as: education abroad, relocation, and tourism, yet published work concentrates more on an individual’s initial experience with culture shock, rather than what happens after one returns home after time spent abroad.

Addressing a target audience is another limitation in this paper. Although I focus primarily on study abroad students, I believe the Acculturation Model can be applied to anyone who has traveled and experienced reverse culture shock. Branching off this, another limitation would be that in my decision to generalize my model (to appeal to a wide range of individuals), I omitted some of the smaller dips, rises, and potential culture shock sub-stages. In this, I feel terminology is key. Terms like “honeymoon phase,” “the plunge,” and “judgmental period” are easy to remember and relate to; therefore, they act as a valuable tool for one to filter their experiences. By omitting these phases, I allow for more personal and individual investment in the Acculturation Model, while leaving room for the individual to pick, choose, and create specific phases they experienced.

In regards to future study and research, I see my model being tested against the existing models (U/W-Curves) to see which model is most relatable and which sufficiently tracks the transitional process of returning study abroad students, tourists, immigrants, etc. If further study is pursued, I believe that looking into individual’s “New Identity” holds the most promise in advancing reverse culture shock study. Some questions that could be addressed include: What are the major contributing factors of an individual’s new identity? What has an individual’s host culture changed about how they identify his/herself in their home country? What percent of an
individual’s new identity is home culture? What percent is the host culture? Can that be
determined/Is it quantifiable? and How does an individual balance their new ideas/opinions
gained from living abroad?

In addition to these suggestions, I believe the Acculturation Model could be used as a
transitional toolkit for study abroad students upon returning home. Taking into account the
general layout of the Acculturation Model, a student would be able to incorporate elements of it
to fashion their own specific, unique transitional path. I would suggest that before the student
begins their study abroad, they take a look at the model, and jot down their assumptions and
expectations, possible dips and rises, and overall feelings about what culture shock and reverse
culture shock entails. When they return, the individual would take their initial hypothesis and see
how it compares to how their transitional experience actually played out. Tracking how one has
progressed and adopted new ways of life in regards to culture exposure is valuable in
understanding new identity. Perhaps my model could even be used as a guide to help students
make their own visual representations of their time abroad—kind of a take on a Build-Your-Own-
Model worksheet. With the option to pick, choose, and label one’s own dips and rises, there
would be no pressure put on a set standard and the illustrated path would be completely
original.

Finally, a variety of universities across the U.S. are already implementing courses and
participating in conferences (Northwest Returnee Conference, CASA Return Conference) that
relate to returning home and reverse culture shock after a study abroad experience. As these
courses aid in the debriefing and readjustment process, my model could be addressed as a
subject of discussion on the uniqueness of a non-linear model and its association to identity.
CHAPTER 7  CONCLUSION

Around the globe, hundreds of thousands of students are inspired to study abroad each year as “every country [offers up] its own culture, language, art, history and institutions, and in its geography, climate, natural resources and animal life, many subjects for study of compelling interest” (p. 7). Sights such as the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Great Barrier Reef and Stonehenge amaze and engage visitors, leaving a lasting memory in their minds forever. Along with incredible sights, study abroad students are fortunate enough to get the chance to spend an extended (although varying) period of time studying in a new country, learning about various subjects that will affect them academically, socially, and psychologically/internally in both the short and long term. The host country becomes their second home as they learn to acculturate themselves into a new society and culture. But what happens after one’s time abroad has reached its end?

After returning home after my two years spent abroad, I found adjusting back very difficult, so I sought out the existing transitional models to rationalize and track my experience. As I realized that my unique experience didn’t fit within these models, I was inspired to create a new model in order to better explain the transitional process returning home- notably with an additional element.

The study of reverse culture shock is important for those who travel and study abroad to not only recognize how they have progressed, but to understand their newfound ideas and opinions on their home culture’s politics, language, cuisine, etc. and how that relates to their new identity. This “New Identity” comes in many forms. Some of which include a spark in confidence, independence, and/or personal development. According to Paige et al. (2006), “Getting the most from study abroad takes time and reflection” (p. 158). While abroad, students get the chance to look back at their home culture through a different perspective. For me,
encountering people who held many stereotypes of Americans was a new experience entirely. In this, I was able to critically look back at my own country and make comparisons to my host country. Upon returning home, one can make new conclusions and opinions about their study abroad experience and personal development.

French philosopher Henri Bergson once said, “To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.” For me, this quote perfectly captures the feeling of studying abroad and its effect on my personal identity. Returning home and reflecting on my time has come with its challenges, but it was definitely worth it. Off to the next adventure!
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