Going Home: Deculturation Experiences in Cultural Reentry

Clark Callahan

Brigham Young University- USA

Abstract

This study tests the process of deculturation as identified in adaptation theory. The context used here is reentry into one's previous culture. If the theoretical descriptions of deculturation are accurate, one would expect those who have adapted to another culture to experience issues of relearning upon return to the original culture. Subjects consisted of returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (afterward referred to as "LDS") who had spent 18 months or 2 years completely immersed in a foreign culture. Using an open-ended survey method, responses were coded and compared statistically. Results do not support deculturation, providing an argument for the sedimentation of cultural functioning.

Keywords: deculturation, LDS, adaptation, culture

Introduction

The return to one's native culture after adapting to an outside host culture has been described in the same manner as initial "culture shock" with a foreign culture. Multiple authors have written about culture shock (Adler 1975; Bennett 1998, 1977; Berry 1992; Clifford 1992; Furnham & Bochner 1989, 1986; Lewis & Jungman 1986; Oberg 1960; Taft 1977, among many others) and have primarily defined it as a feeling of disorientation or discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of the environment. Oberg, who coined this term, viewed this process much like a disease. It has its own symptoms and progresses through the "sickness" that hopefully culminates in full recovery into the new cultural situation and a feeling of being at home within it (Oberg 1960). This metaphor, however, is not universally accepted.

Cultural communication scholars note that readaptation into a native environment is even more difficult than initial culture shock because it can be very unexpected (Martin & Harrell 1996). Students (Martin 1986) and business people (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall 1992) returning home, as well as Native American, returning to their tribes have reported problems readjusting. There is a wide body of literature discussing the difficulty of returning home (Adler 1981; Austin 1987, 1986, 1983; Brewster & Pickard 1995; Campus Crusade for Christ 1980; Clifford 1992; Colburn 1987; Downie 1976; Eakin 1988; Hegde 1997; Oboler 1995; Sorti 1997, 1990).

Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) add that reentry difficulties can be more pronounced a short time after arrival rather than immediately because the individual does not expect culture shock; in fact, most people expect the return home to be easy (Martin & Harrell 1996). Two main reasons have been cited for reentry difficulties. First, the sojourner changes through contact with another culture in the contexts of language, customs, dress, and worldview. Second, the condition of the original culture has changed. Physical, linguistic, social, religious, familial, and technological changes may have occurred during the visitor's absence. Additionally, views and responses from others toward the re-entrant may have changed as well, perhaps based on assumption that the sojourner's experiences have changed him or her. Jansson (1975) explains this very succinctly:

> In most cases, there is a shift in values, a portion of "history" that is not mutually shared, and behaviors which differ from those expected within the social system. The re-entrant is in the minority and is, in a sense, defined by those who remained in the group. (136)

The purpose of this article is to investigate the deculturation process used in theoretical approaches to adaptation. This is done by using the context of the sojourner's return home to determine the extent to which deculturation is evident. Findings are then compared to intercultural approaches to the adaptation process.

The adaptation process occurs when individuals travel from one culture to another, both in long and short term encounters. Along with this movement, there seems to be a process of adjustment and familiarization with the new situation. This adjustment has been labeled as socialization and has several processes (Gudykunst & Kim 2003, 1997). They are enculturation, which is the learning of the culture; acculturation, which involves the process of resocialization; deculturation, which is the unlearning of the original culture; and finally assimilation, which is a state of high deculturation of the original culture and acculturation of the new culture. According to Gudykunst and Kim, these sociological processes form the foundation of communication investigations, and communication is vital to this process because adaptation occurs in and through communication.

Adaptation theory has as its tenets the concepts of acculturation and deculturation. Acculturation occurs when individuals, "become acquainted with and adopt some of the norms and values of salient reference groups of the host society. As acculturation takes place, however, some unlearning of old cultural patterns occurs as well…" (Gudykunst & Kim 1997: 337). Through the adaptation process an individual develops new responses that are adopted in situations that previously would have evoked different ones. According to this theory, then, when one adapts to a new cultural structure, there is an unlearning of original cultural habits.

The above discussion provides the following research question:

RQ1: Is the theoretical description of deculturation supported by reentry experiences?

Method

Sample

In order to conduct the comparison of theories, as well as understand/verify what happens when individuals return from a secondary culture to the one of their origin, the sample must consist of individuals with the following characteristics. First, they must have traveled to and returned from a different cultural context. Second, some sort of interest in functioning in that culture should have been evident in their stay. Third, they should have remained in that culture long enough to gain an understanding of it. Fourth, these individuals will have returned to their original cultural context. Finally, to exclude cultural characteristics from contaminating the outcome, the subject pool must have experienced a number of different cultures. Based on these criteria, several subject groups can be identified, including international study abroad students, business and corporate personnel, technical assistant and other professional workers, military personnel, and religious missionaries who travel abroad for a certain period of time. While all of these groups could be helpful in the comparison, foreign missionaries provide an intriguing study group based on the above criteria. The data for this research was derived from returned missionaries who proselytized for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (afterward referred to as LDS).

LDS Culture and Missionaries as Subjects

LDS Missionaries who have lived and worked in foreign countries seem to fit smoothly into the subject criteria. These missionaries (usually between 19 and 25 years of age) spend between 18 months or 2 years in a foreign country (this time is called a "mission"). Participants in this study were selected from United States citizens who traveled abroad, although individuals from foreign countries also travel to the United States (and other foreign countries) to fulfill their "mission." At the end of their designated time, the missionaries return home. They are not allowed to stay in host countries unless their parents retrieve them. Secondly, these individuals are trained to be "native" and, as much as possible, to absorb the culture.[1] Missionaries attempt to absorb the host culture, as that will lead to increased relationship/commonalities with church members and citizens of the host culture, thereby facilitating the missionary effort. Cultural and linguistic training begins before individuals leave the United States in a school called the Missionary Training Center (MTC). Missionaries stay in the MTC anywhere from 3 to

12 weeks, depending on language requirements. Third, missionaries are expected to devote the entire time of their service—women for 18 months and men for 2 years—to missionary work.[2] They are not allowed to leave their assigned area, and they cannot travel beyond geographical boundaries, arguably making their emersion into the host culture even more intensive. Additionally, the only contact with their home culture is through letters and in some cases weekly email correspondence. Except in cases of emergency, LDS missionaries are only allowed to telephone home twice a year, once on Christmas Day and once on Mother's Day. Reasons for these restrictions include limiting external distractions and avoiding homesickness. They cannot watch television and are generally banned from all mass media. Finally, upon returning to their original culture, these individuals are encouraged to immediately resume socially appropriate activities for those of their age, including work, school, and social activities. There are no transition programs to aid in the return home.

Missionaries are more detached from their home culture than military, business, or educational sojourners. They are almost complete integrated into the host culture, with very limited home culture contact, pressure to become "native" (willingness to adapt), and an instantaneous reentry experience. Because of this, LDS missionaries are perhaps the best type of subjects. They are therefore integral to testing intercultural theories.

Because of their unique experiences, returned missionaries have been the focus of varied research. Some of these studies include returned missionaries and church activity (Madsen 1977), the missionary experience (Perry 2001; Shepherd & Shepherd 2001), missionaries and cultural change (Wilson 2001; Knowlton 2001) transition into "normal" social roles (Dunn & Heffelfinger 1987; Sellars 1971) and even intercultural value orientation (Bradford 1986). Knowlton (2001) also identified a growing interest among anthropologists in looking at LDS missions as an important social and cultural process (see also Aaby & Hvalkof 1981; Alves 1985; Bastian 1985; Camaroff 1985; Camaroff & Camaroff 1986; Flora 1976; Harding 1987; Knowlton 1982, 1988; Stoll 1991). Again, returned LDS missionaries make excellent subjects for this cultural research because they have almost total physical and mental emersion into the host culture and an extremely quick shift from the host back to the original culture. If (and to what degree) deculturation is experienced by cultural sojourners, it would most likely be observed in this context.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected in two ways. First, a solicitation was made to bulletin boards at www.mission.net. This is a Web site designed to offer returned LDS missionaries a forum for discussing their experiences; keeping contact with other missionaries, foreign church members, and friends; and receiving updates on the area where they served or were stationed. Permission was obtained from the board administrator, and a posting made asking for subjects.

A second strategy for selecting participants used research assistants to identify potential participants from four areas of the United States (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West). This was done to provide greater geographical diversity within the subject pool. The overall number of participants was 93.

Instrument

Respondents were given a survey questionnaire asking open-ended questions regarding their experiences. The survey consisted of seven different lines of questioning, each of which was designed to identify personal experiences in the reentry process (see Appendix A). The questions addressed topics such as general impressions of the reentry experiences, problems identified upon reentry, self-reported strategies for "fitting in," the degree of willingness to return home, cultural lapses in the reentry process and their consequences, the degree of personal cultural change recognized by the individual, and lasting characteristics of the move. The questions were based off of a pilot study which used grounded theory to identify codes, themes, and eventually these seven categories. These categories structured the questions for the survey. Additionally, in an effort to discover elements of deculturation, however small, the questions were worded as if the participant had encountered it. For example, question 2 asked "Explain the most troubling aspect of returning home?" In this way the instrument was designed to compensate for any participant self-censure.

There were two primary goals involved in testing participant responses. The first goal was to code, identify, and place them into categories. The second was to determine if there were significant differences between the observed and expected frequencies. These nominal categories were then analyzed for significant difference. Once the comparison was completed, deculturation was analyzed based on findings of significant difference. In this way RQ1 was addressed.

Results

Demographics of the Survey

Four main demographic variables were identified as important to this project. These variables included age, sex, foreign culture visited, and data concerning each individual's return to the United States. The demographic data from the 93 responses was somewhat predicable. The average age of respondents was 39, with a median age of 46, and a mode of 26. The sex of the respondents was 73% male and 27% female. This is somewhat close to the overall percentages of the missionary population (85% male, 15 % female). No significant findings were discovered in relation to sex. There were a wide variety of foreign cultures visited by these missionaries. These cultures, as defined by their geo-political boundaries, included Argentina, Austria, Australia, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Ecuador, England, France, Germany, Haiti, Honduras, Italy, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, and Thailand. As one might expect, the dates of return to the United States correlate with the age of the respondent. Most subjects performed their mission at about 19-21 years of age. However, several respondents were "couple missionaries," retired couples who volunteered for missionary service. These individuals may have completed more than one mission and in different cultures and locations. The most recent return date was in 2002, the earliest was 1959. The mean return year was 1985 with a median of 1980 and a mode of 1997.

Deculturation

Gudykunst and Kim (1997), describe acculturation as the unlearning of old cultural patterns. Again, these new cultural patterns are used in situations which would normally have evoked other responses. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) identify the dynamic between acculturation and deculturation as essential to the adaptation process. "As the dynamic interplay of acculturation and deculturation continues, newcomers gradually undergo a cross-cultural adaptation process" (359). This process may not reach the value level, but "strangers may adopt the cultural patterns of the host society to a significant degree" (Gudykust & Kim 1997: 337). One would expect the data to show significant prolonged exposure to a foreign culture, coupled with a motivated effort to function efficiently within that culture, to supply adequate "emotional and physiological differences" upon return to the home culture.

The elements of the textual responses were identified and placed into two categories, forgetting original culture (as identified through lapses or reverting to foreign culture once home)—deculturation, and little or no forgetting of the original culture—no deculturation. This variable is labeled "unlearning." The following are examples of responses falling into each category:

> No Deculturation: "It actually wasn't too much of a culture shock when I got home. My family said that I adjusted very quickly."

> Deculturation: "For a long time I didn't [fit back in]. I wanted to wear my Latino/Mayan clothing, but my sisters 'encouraged' me to live in an apartment with other roommates, rather than at home, which I did. That social surrounding was crucial for my reassimilation back into 'normal' life."

Table 1

Distribution of Deculturation Responses among Returned Missionaries

	Deculturation No Deculturation Total	No Deculturation	Total
	8	85	93

Observed Frequency			
Expected Frequency	46.5	46.5	93

X^2 for this table is 63.75. With 1 degree of freedom, this value of X^2 is statistically significant at the p<.05 level (critical value is 3.84). There is a significant difference between descriptions of unlearning as found in adaptation and fusion theories. Φ^2 for this difference is .69, indicating a fairly strong difference.

Deculturation is not supported by the data. All respondents, regardless of age, sex, place of the mission, or feelings about the mission reported a change in their views toward the foreign culture and their own. These responses fell into several categories, and were associated with conception of endless integration and invention as facilitated by their time in the foreign culture. These responses included feelings of interculturalness, multilingualism, altered views of home (both positive and negative), patriotism, and self-growth. In addition to this, there was greater identification of the ability to compare cultures, including one's own. One respondent wrote:

> I did feel a larger sense of distrust around Americans, even though I'm one of them. I never felt threatened in Japan. America seems to have a lot more violent aggression. And I missed the quiet industrious confidence of the Japanese people as a whole.

Overall, participants in this study do not conform to the process of deculturation, as their experiences were not given or taken away, but seem to have been sedimented and layered into new modes of thinking and conceptualizing the world around them. One respondent (Chile) writes, "The experience changed my life dramatically…I grew to love the people and to love opportunities to learn from other cultures. This has inspired me to pursue a year of foreign studies in Turkey."

This finding not only corresponded with participant attitudes toward culture, but was apparent in other modes of expression such as language (slang or other cultural codes) or skills. An example of this is found in the experience of a returned missionary who states:

> About two years after I returned home, I was driving from a restaurant up the canyon late in the evening, and realized I was driving on the wrong side of the road (correct side for England). I had driven about one mile when I realized what I was doing. I had driven in England for about six months.

The original way of driving was not lost, but retrieved upon return. The foreign way of driving was not lost either, even two years afterward. Obviously, there was a combination of experiences influencing this result—driving on BOTH sides of the road. This theme was echoed throughout many of the responses. It is a sentiment of living both cultures simultaneously; of identifying oneself as both native and foreign. The findings of this study indicate that one does not become merely socialized into another culture, but integrates the combined experiences. Another subject stated:

> My wife also served a mission to the same country after I did and that common experience and culture plays an important part in our bonding that led to our marriage. We also use French as our secret language to communicate in secret, especially around our children.

The choice to incorporate elements of the host culture into permanent life in the home culture was widespread in the responses. Many respondents reported continuing patterns from the host culture even after their return. "I also had trouble eating supper—we ate a big meal in the afternoon and then rested. It's been 20 years and I still need a break in the afternoon!"

Respondents in this research demonstrate an addition in cultural functioning. There were those respondents (32%) that reported no cultural lapses at all (another 59% reported some lapses, but nothing that was distressing). However, the responses reporting lapses were not all negative. Some illustrated simple problems like an affinity for certain foods or customs and progressed to more serious and

potential relapses such as driving on the wrong side of the road (as reported by two respondents). Only about 9% of respondents self-identified significant cultural lapses.

All of the responses in this study identified cultural characteristics in relation to cultural lapses (food, language, driving, etc.). By far the most prevalent topic was language. Many respondents felt that they could not express themselves in English like they wanted to (including issues of slang). Many respondents mentioned this in general terms, but it was also specifically noted in the religious context. This was especially true for those who identified themselves as speaking only a foreign language during the duration of their mission (not all went to countries that spoke a foreign language).

Again, this experience tended to expand the horizon of individuals upon returning. An excellent example of this was posited by one former missionary who served in Argentina:

> I think I can understand and appreciate Hispanic peoples much better than I did before my mission. We lived in an agricultural area in California for several years and I enjoyed speaking Spanish and spending time with Mexican immigrants there. I think we were able to help some of them adjust to living in the United States. I would have been completely oblivious to them if not for having lived in a Spanish-speaking culture. I'm still very concerned about the economic situation of Latin America and am planning to get involved in church programs to support education and training—after I get my small children raised.

None of the respondents reported "losing" their home culture. Several worked to not suspend it as much, to keep it a part of themselves in the host culture, but no one in this study reported having to relearn any integral cultural processes. Of the responses mentioning "forgetting" all were of a superficial nature (e.g. check writing) and were reported as easy to overcome. The primary difference was in the way language was described. Over half of the respondents reported at least an initial difficulty speaking English (United States dialect) again. This was even true for those who had lived in English speaking countries like England, Ireland, and Australia. Reports included the need to "become adjusted to the sound of American voices again," and that "the Queen's English was better, softer, and more quiet than ours." This difficulty in speaking English seemed to be a greater concern for those who were home fewer than four years. Older respondents did not identify this issue. Of the problems in speaking English, most of the difficulties were reported in speaking on religious topics. This is certainly understandable as this was the major topic of conversation throughout the mission experience. One respondent six years removed from his mission experience claimed that he still had trouble discussing religious topics in English.

Adaptation's proposition of deculturation, then, was not supported by the data. Over 85% of the respondents identified having little or no trouble reentering United States culture. The respondents who did mention difficulty did not mention it in terms of the foreign culture, but in terms of the missionary culture. This was identified in two ways. First, the structure of mission life accounted for the majority of difficulty upon reentry. The lack of structure upon return included not being with a companion constantly and the oversight of one's activity (supervision), for example. Second, no responses acknowledged foreign cultural characteristics that made reentry more difficult. In fact, several respondents identified either foreign cultural characteristics or their time in that culture as being helpful in the return process. But by far, the most discomfort occurred when respondents attempted to return to normal social activities, including school, work, and especially dating.

There were evidences that elements of the home culture had been forgotten. These included language, especially concerning religious topics, and some skill elements of cultural functioning, such as being "rusty" at social skills. The responses were not overwhelming and not forceful enough to warrant buoying one's unlearning. This was evidenced by the massive reports of no problems adjusting at all to the reentry. These findings agree with Dunn and Heffelfinger's (1987) findings regarding feelings of returned missionaries upon immediate return. They found that the majority of respondents felt positive about the process. There was, however, one difference. They described a slightly higher number of returned missionaries who self-reported feelings of culture shock.[3] If deculturation was to be demonstrated by this study, one would have expected to see more problems upon reentry.

In sum, significant feelings of deculturation were not found in this study. There may be three reasons for this finding. First, perhaps this is because the participants used within this study did not have adequate time to fully adapt to their new culture. Kim (2002) argued that cross-cultural adaptation is a lifelong

process. The longer the sojourner stays within the host culture the more deculturation occurs. A person, then, who resides in a host culture for ten years will experience more deculturation than the person who stayed 2 years. Second, maybe the person who knows she or he will return home at a specific time can delay deculturation or eliminate it altogether. These would be individuals who are just "waiting it out" with no motivation to adapt to the host environment. Third, it is possible that deculturation does not really occur. Kramer (2002) used hermeneutics to argue that our intercultural experiences fuse within previous experiences, perhaps even combining into something altogether different from each culture. Cultural experiences are never lost, only buried deep in our social functioning. This idea of fused experiences was reported in many participant responses.

Conclusion

Intercultural migration is increasing (Heofern, Rytina, & Baker 2009; Rytina 2009). According to the International Organization for Migration, the numbers of people moving from their home cultures between 1990 and 2005 increased by about 65 million (IOM 2005). Probably more important than the number of migrants is their lengths of stay, which has dramatically decreased. "With increased temporary migration, particularly of highly skilled persons, voluntary return has become a major feature of migration in recent years (IOM 2005: 14). Types of cultural migration are changing which means that adaptation may no longer be a lifelong process for many cultural sojourners. These changes in types of migration experiences, coupled with changing social and technological factors, require a reinvestigation into how we model the contact process. This research has attempted to fill this need.

Scholars like Oboler (1995) and Hedge (1997) argue that increased intercultural contacts necessitate a change in the ways scholars approach it. Current approaches seem to have discounted this trend. "But today, with vast infrastructures of transportation and communication, the difference between the center and periphery is deconstructing. Cultures are fusing all over but of course with various rates according to access. Defusion is no longer unilinear" (Kramer 2002: 25). Future studies concerned with the theoretical description of the contact process should be more concerned with how this is taking place. Studies of this sort would identify movement and types of movement and their impacts on the contact process. Additionally, more work needs to be done to identify how cultures respond internally to increased media and technological pressures. Does the increase in communication technology warrant a change in the way we view the phenomenon? Are the older studies based on outdated models of movement and research?

Mumford (1974) has stated that, "every manifestation of human culture, from ritual and speech to costume and social organization, is directed ultimately to the remodeling of the human organism and the expression of human personality" (10). This research demonstrates the additive nature of cultural contact. While sojourners may never be able to "go home" in the psychological sense, the data show that upon returning migrants are *more* than who they were when they left, not less.

Notes

1) Of course, individuals who are not willing to absorb the host culture have the option of returning home, an option which few take. There is no data disclosing the number of missionaries returning home early because of culture shock reasons. It is assumed that while many of those experiencing difficulties may return home, there are others who just "stick it out."
2) Fifteen percent of the overall missionary workforce is made up of females, 85% are male.
3) There may be several reasons for this difference, including global media. These reasons, however, are not discussed here.

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Appendix A

Returning Home Survey

Age:

Male or Female:

Foreign culture visited:

Date returned to U.S.:

Describe your experiences upon returning to the United States after your mission was completed:

Explain the most troubling aspect of returning home:

How did you fit back in?

Describe your feeling before you left your mission. Were you excited to come home? Nervous? Would you rather have stayed a little longer?

Did you have any lapses (reverting to the foreign culture) once you got home? If so, how did you deal with them?

Do you think your time in another culture (outside of the U.S.) changed you in any way? If so, in what way and how did that effect you fitting back in to the U.S.?

Do you feel that there are any lasting consequences to your time in another culture? If so, what were they?

About the Author

Clark Callahan is an Assistant Professor and director of the International Media Studies Program at Brigham Young University. His research interests include Intercultural Communication, Media Ecology, and Communication History.

Author's Address
Clark Callahan
360 BRMB
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602
(801) 422-1493
clark_callahan@byu.edu