

## Introduction to Reverse Culture Shock

When a person moves from his home culture where everything is familiar—expected interpersonal relations, language, ways of interpreting events and ideas, views of time and space, and daily behavior—to another culture where *everything* differs culture shock often results. However, when the same person returns “home” after adjusting to the other culture a similar set of differences may well appear. “Home” is not what was expected. Nothing quite fits the expectations because of two primary reasons: 1) The person has changed, and, 2) “Home” has changed. Depending on a range of variables the returnee may experience “reverse culture shock.”



Katharine Curiel defined reverse culture shock as “the psychosomatic and psychological consequences of the readjustment process to one's home culture after growing accustomed to a new one” (2016:78). Robin Pascoe in *Homeward Bound* wrote, “Re-entry shock is when you feel like you are wearing contact lenses in the wrong eyes. Everything looks almost right.”

The reverse culture shock may be evidenced in a variety of ways. Some of the common ways include: 1) Being critical of what was/is considered as “home;” 2) A sense of being marginalized/denigrated/degraded; 3) Feeling tired or even exhausted; 4) Feeling depressed and doubting oneself or withdrawing as one is increasingly discontented with the home culture; 5) Feeling misunderstood; or, 6) Feeling alienated. Teenagers and other younger children may not see the USA as “home,” but rather “home” is where they lived previously and may have been in school.



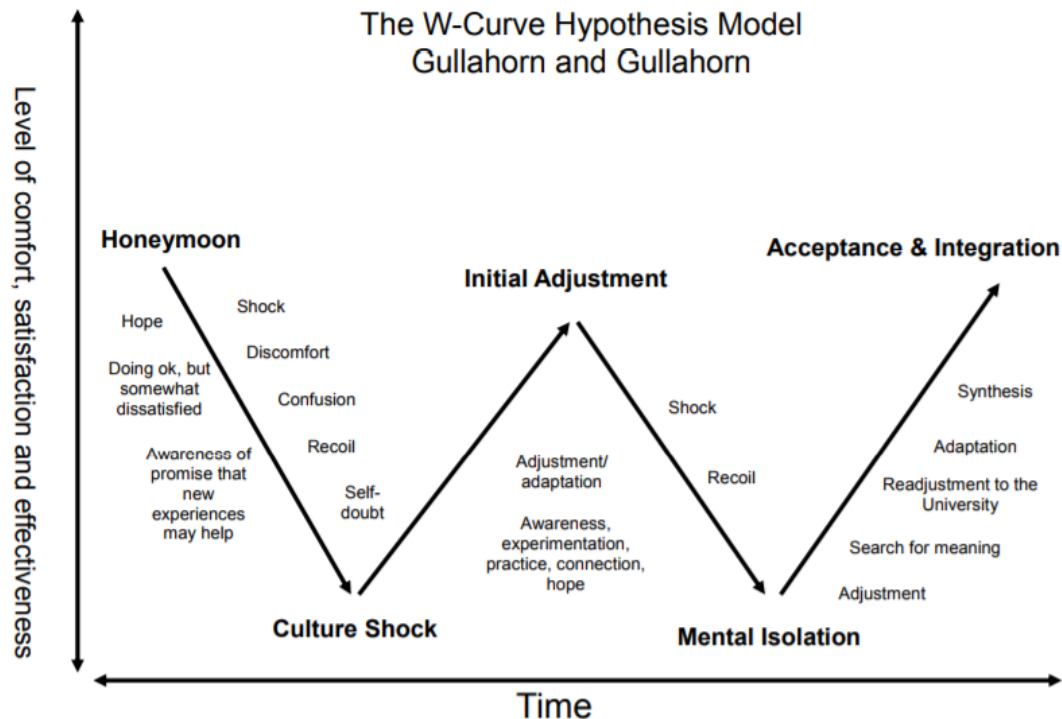
The U.S. State Dept. has identified some general challenges cross-cultural workers often face as they return. Some of these challenges include the following:

- People at home are not as interested in hearing about your foreign experience as you are in telling them about it.
- You are not as interested in hearing about what has happened at home as they are in telling you about it.
- You miss being abroad.
- You miss the celebrity status of being an “American” overseas—at home, you do not stand out as much.
- You miss the “royal” treatment, lifestyle and social status you may have enjoyed abroad.
- You miss the tight-knit foreign affairs community you were a part of (<https://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c56075.htm#Phases>).

While we did not see ourselves as wealthy on our missionary salaries and expense allowances, when we lived in both African urban and rural areas our standard of living was significantly higher than the people around us. When we returned to the USA, after years of living in East African countries and then consulting in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, we were amazed at the materialistic waste we experienced upon our return. The most challenging set of issues for us was the difference in values and attitudes from what we remembered. Whether going to a movie, watching television or even reading magazines, values and attitudes had become much more secularized, anti-Christian, and prejudiced. The high-speed pace of life seemed to preclude the building of relationships or restoring ones we had had in the past.

Even now more than 30 years after first returning on a “permanent” basis, I still see my “home” culture differently from my neighbors and friends at church. As I read Facebook postings, watch television or go to movies, I shake my head in wondering about my culture. I often see the validity of other perspectives not share by many friends.

John and Jeanne Gullahorn developed a visual which aptly describes the typical “rollercoaster” experience of adjusting and readjusting.



Source: Hofferburger, K., Mosier, R., & Stokes, B. (1999). Transition experience. In J.H. Schuh (Ed.), Educational programming and student learning in college and university residence halls. Columbus, OH: ACUHO-I

As we think about RCS whether as cross-cultural workers or their supporters, we can take steps to reduce the effects of RCS. If we take steps to build awareness before

going cross-culturally or returning, we can reduce the issues. If we recognize the issues, we can help friends and family through numerous encouraging ways as they face these issues.