Spring 5-1995

The Psychological Aspects of Travel Abroad

Alison Malyn Shumate-Fowler
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF TRAVEL ABROAD

Ali Shumate
Whittle Scholar
Senior Project

Abstract

The Psychological Aspects of Travel Abroad

This paper focuses on the experience of dealing with other
cultures and the psychological factors involved. The author
explores this issue, recognizing that many people today are
culturally sheltered, having no desire to open their minds beyond
the boundaries of our great nation. Several journal articles
are drawn upon in an attempt to pinpoint the cause of this
distancing, describe the psychological aspects of encountering
other cultures (expounding upon the term "culture shock" and
describing its four phases), and state ways in which the anxiety
and uncertainty inherent in encountering other cultures may
be reduced.

The author next delves further into the issue, relating findings
to personal experience as a "stranger in strange land." Changed
perceptions and realizations regarding kinship are discussed,
as well as the way in which a changed view of other cultures
can ultimately alter one's own "world view."

Finally, the author concludes by making recommendations based
on journal articles and personal experience for students
preparing to travel abroad in order that they may be better
prepared for their adventure. Both reasons why "culture shock"
exists and helpful hints to alleviate the stress which
accompanies travel abroad are taken into account.

Whom do I consider to be my kin? Specifically, do I draw the distinction along blood lines and accept relatives more readily than other people? Where do I draw my boundary of compassion? Do I draw the line between my own culture and other cultures? If so, which other cultures do I choose? These are extremely difficult questions. Such decisions are usually not consciously agreed upon, but are, rather, based on the cumulative effects of many years of exposure to passive learning.

Kinship, in this situation, refers to a feeling of compassion felt toward those who may or may not actually be one's blood relative -- in other words, the point at which one draws a line of compassion. In contemplating the answer to these questions regarding my own perception of kinship and of other cultures, I began to realize that a fairly recent experience may be drawn upon in order to fashion an appropriate answer. I had a wonderful experience last year living in Glasgow, Scotland, studying psychology, politics, and history at the University of Strathclyde. While there, my previous viewpoint concerning kinship -- more specifically my perception of other cultures -- was altered due to an increased awareness, although I am only now beginning to realize what was actually happening to me.

Why Travel Abroad? Everything anyone could want is easily found here in our own country -- often in abundance. This type of comment is heard time and time again, yet there are very

good reasons why people should experience another culture.
Travel abroad affects each person differently, on a personal
level -- from developing new interests to developing a network
of contacts around the world, which could greatly aid career
plans. Horizons are broadened and communication skills are
developed. One exchange student said her experience abroad
made a significant impact on her life; she likened the experience
to turning the ignition on a car.

Evidence exists supporting the claim that travel abroad
is beneficial. Michael H. Stitsworth (1989) has studied a group
of students who had spent time in Japan and writes that, in
comparison with a control group,

> the overseas group increased in flexibility and
> independence and became less conventional. Nash (1976)
> noted that students cite benefits such as personal
> growth, increased tolerance, improved
> self-understanding, greater openness, greater
> independence, and increased sophistication. Kelman
> and Beilyn (1962) concluded, "Experience in a foreign
> country exposes an individual to a variety of
> influences that may challenge his existing attitudes
> and values (p.215).

Furthermore, Hayden (1981) goes so far as to tout travel abroad
as a "lifeshaping event" (Stitsworth, 1989, p.215).

In addition, travel abroad has been said to be a way to
increase creativity. Gurman has pointed out a commonality shared
by creative people: they have experienced diversity -- "a wide
variety of experiences, often dating back to childhood" (1989,
p.12). He argues that it is the exposure to novel situations
which stimulates the creative process (p.12). Therefore, travel
abroad should provide the perfect novel situation to stimulate

2

creativity. Nolan Bushnell, founder of the Atari Corporation,

agrees, adding that many of his best ideas arose through

traveling. He states:

> A significant number of my big-money ideas have
> occurred to me while on vacation or on foreign travel.
> At work, you're on automatic pilot a lot of the time.
> But you go to France, and although you're struggling
> with the language, the hotel, transportation, you
> do have leisure. The telephone isn't ringing and
> there aren't people hounding you, so you have time
> to think...Or maybe it's just that you get a fresh
> perspective. You know, you see the forest from a
> thousand miles away (The Pryor Report, 1985, p.7).

Therefore, it has been established that travel abroad is a worthy

tool for broadening one's horizons, increasing one's flexibility

and independence, and developing one's creative skills. However,

the actual experience of encountering other cultures -- although

quite wonderful -- may prove to be complicated, practically

as well as psychologically.

There are many psychological aspects inherent in

encountering other cultures, as being immersed in another culture

often has tremendous emotional effects. This phenomenon has

been negatively termed "culture shock," but such accompanying

effects need not always be viewed as negative. Anthropologist

Waud Kracke writes that

> Discussions of methodology have, since the fifties,
> carried brief warnings about "culture shock," conceived
> quite narrowly (as the very term suggests) as a
> troublesome and uncomfortable, but fortunately
> transitory, hindrance to adaptation and to the real
> business of understanding the culture. It is often,
> only half humorously, diagnosed as a transient form
> of mental illness (1987, p.58).

Kracke, instead, prefers to describe the experience of

encountering another culture as "an alternation of excitement,

discovery, frustration, embarrassment, liberation, depression, elation, puzzlement, and only occasionally the kind of abrupt and disconcerting surprises implied in the term 'shock'" (1987, p.60).

In his article, "Encounter With Other Cultures," Kracke outlines conceptions of such intercultural encounters as a psychological process -- both negative conceptions, stressing the separation from one's own culture, and positive conceptions, stressing engagement with the new culture and its integration into one's world view (1987, p.62). The first negative model is what Kracke refers to as the classic pathological model of "culture shock" as a "self-limiting crisis;" transcultural Psychiatrist Ronald Wintrob has even termed this phase a "dysadaptation syndrome," as many feel that this is a time at which all productivity comes to a complete standstill due to the shocking quality of the situation (1987, p.62).

The second negative conception is that which compares the immersion in another culture with the process of mourning: Cuban Analyst A. Cesar Garza-Guerrero describes culture shock as "a process of mourning the lost culture, with its familiar meanings and values and cues, and as a threat to one's identity posed by the new culture" (Kracke, 1987, p.63). According to Kracke (1987), William Sangree cites "grief not only for friends left, but more deeply for techniques and habits by which he deals with his social world, cherished ideals and expectations," and particularly for his "partial but very profound loss of control" (Kracke, 1987, p.64). Kracke mentions as well a

4

phenomenon which he dubs a "hypervaluation of aspects of one's own culture that one had previously rejected;" this experience can be compared to Volkan's "linking objects" (1972), mementos of the deceased that are treasured by mourners. For example, during his time in the jungle, Kracke states that he had a tendency to cling to tokens of his own culture, finding relief and gratification in postcards of Rio and Chicago. There is a sort of comfort in catching a glimpse of something considered normal in the "world left behind," and it is these things to which travelers cling with a fervor.

Positive conceptions of the intercultural experience, however, deal more strongly with actual engagement with the culture. The most prevalent of these is the regression-resocialization model, described by William Caudill as "initial enthusiasm for the culture" (1961:410) rather quickly followed by frustration and disillusionment with the recognition that one is not successfully communicating, and that one can not follow one's accustomed patterns of interaction (Kracke, 1987, p.63).

In their book <u>Going International</u>, Copeland and Griggs take a position which is consistent with Kracke's view of a too-narrow past conception of culture shock. They write that

> Experts reject the concept of culture shock as a malady that one catches and then gets over. It is not something that strikes suddenly or results from a single event. Instead, it builds up over time, an accumulation of minor or major cultural confrontations that may be difficult to pinpoint (1985. p.196).

Now that the different aspects of culture shock have been

5

discussed, it seems that the next logical step is to recognize that the majority of the population has feelings of anxiety about encountering other cultures and to look for some way in which these feelings of uncertainty may be alleviated. This leads to a theory of intercultural adaptation proposed by G. Gao and W.B. Gudykunst. Although the root cause of difficulties encountered in another culture is not yet agreed upon, Gudykunst and Hammer assume that such problems stem from strangers being unsure of how to behave, (i.e., they have uncertainty) and from experiencing the feeling of lack of security (i.e., they have anxiety) (302). This attitude is in keeping with Nelson's statement that "uncertainty reduction theory suggests that when individuals meet, their primary concern is to reduce uncertainty or increase predictability about both their behavior and the behavior of others in the interaction (Berger, 1979; Berger & Calabrese, 1975)" (Nelson, 33). Gudykunst and Hammer assume as well that although uncertainty reduction and anxiety alleviation are not sufficient cause for intercultural adaptation, the combination of the two should provide both necessary and sufficient condition for such adaptation to occur (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990, p.302).

Now that a cause for such feelings of uncertainty has been established, one must pinpoint a way in which this uncertainty and anxiety may be alleviated. In answer to this need, Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) have isolated eight variables related to reducing uncertainty and anxiety:

    1. [Knowledge of Host Culture] will produce an

increase in the accuracy of strangers' predictions and explanations of the behavior of host nationals.
2. [Shared Networks]: An increase in the networks that strangers share with members of the host culture will produce an increase in the accuracy of their predictions and explanations of the behavior of host nationals.
3. [Intergroup Attitudes]: An increase in negative intergroup attitudes (that is, prejudice and ethnocentrism) will produce a decrease in the accuracy of strangers' predictions and explanations regarding the behavior of host nationals.
4. [Favorable Contact]: An increase in the "favorable" contact strangers have with host nationals will produce a decrease in the anxiety they experience upon entering the host culture ... [and] ... an increase in the accuracy of their predictions and explanations of the behavior of host nationals.
5. [Stereotypes]: An increase in the negative stereotypes of host nationals will produce an increase in the anxiety strangers experience upon entering the host culture.
6. [Cultural Identity]: An increase in the strength of strangers' cultural identity will produce an increase in the accuracy of their predictions and explanations of the behavior of host nationals ... [and] ... in the anxiety they experience upon entering the host culture.
7. [Cultural Similarity]: An increase in the similarity between host and native culture will produce an increase in the accuracy of strangers' predictions and explanations of the behavior ... [and] ... a decrease in the anxiety strangers experience upon entering the host culture.
8. [Second Language Competence : an increase in this will produce] an increase in the accuracy of [strangers'] predictions and explanations of the behavior of host nationals ... [and] ... a decrease in the anxiety experienced upon entering the host culture (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990, p.305).

In order to effectively apply the eight variables to alleviate uncertainty and anxiety, one must understand the process that takes place in encountering other cultures. Copeland and Griggs (1985) write of a "cycle of readjustment" marked by four phases, rather than the archaic, simple-minded view of culture shock:

Phase 1: described as the "tourist phase," this is a

7

euphoric period in which the person takes many pictures and
is very excited about the move. In this initial phase, it is
said that one "may notice how surprisingly similar things are
to home, and things that are dissimilar seem merely quaint"
(p.196).

Phase 2: the "elements of the new culture" are said to
begin to intrude, and "they are not always enchanting."
Curiosity, at this point, begins to be replaced by feelings
including irritation, impatience, frustration, anger, and
depression (p.196).

Phase 3: the individual begins to learn, change, and adapt.
One either begins to accept the local ways or to find ways in
which to better handle existing negative feelings (Copeland
& Griggs, 1985, p.196). A person in this phase feels less
isolated and more comfortable; it is at this point that one
begins to look "onward and upward" to eventful days ahead
(p.196).

Phase 4: the individual comes to feel at home and to truly
enjoy both the country and the culture (p.196). Now it is he
who "knows the ropes" -- he is the local expert on whose
shoulders newcomers may now cry (p.196).

Kracke's idea is consistent with this model, particularly
with Phase 2, in that with time, the ideal image dissipates
and conflicts arise, with the possibility of "emotional swings
between excitement or idyllic delight, and intense longing for
friends, family, and home" (1987, p.67). Copeland and Griggs
note as well that at this point "minor nuisances often become

8

catastrophic upsets...Some people withdraw, develop obsessions
(about cleanliness, fear of foreigners, overeating, or sleeping)
or become overtly hostile and aggressive" (p.196). Thus, if
one is aware of Gao & Gudykunst's eight variables and understands
the four phases of culture shock, he should be much better
prepared to handle trying situations if and when they occur.

PERSONAL APPLICATION OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Having just spent one year in a foreign country living
among people of different cultures, I experienced first-hand
many of the situations written about in the literature. I
experienced Phase 1 -- the "tourist phase" (and I have the
pictures to prove it!). The excitement of being in another
country -- one which I had only previously seen in my World
Geography class -- was completely overwhelming. I wanted to
drink in every drop of the atmosphere at once. Soon, however,
Phase 2 began to creep into my idyllic new life. I was
irritated. I soon began to curse those endearing little
specialty shops, wishing longingly for a Wal-Mart. I was
frustrated by the fact that I didn't quite understand their
bus and underground system when I desperately needed to go
somewhere fast. Then, along came Phase 3, like a knight in
shining armor to rescue me. I figured out the underground system
and found my own favorite specialty shops, buying gifts there
to bring home for Christmas. I looked forward to exploring
and finding new things to admire, and I knew exactly where to
go for the things which I needed. Then at Phase 4, I did know

the ropes, I felt confident in going anywhere I needed to go and was even able to give directions to tourists. My family came to visit, and I showed them around Glasgow like the city was my own. This was undoubtedly a very exciting time for me.

Now looking back and realizing that I did actually go through the four phases of readjustment, I do agree with both Copeland & Griggs and with Kracke in their assessment that past literature has oversimplified "culture shock." For as I swam through a series of potent emotions during the course of my trip abroad, none of them ever felt direct or shocking enough to fit under this simple term.

Another phenomenon mentioned in the literature which I experienced personally was Kracke's "hypervaluation of aspects of one's host culture." Although my conditions were not severe like Kracke's jungle life and I enjoyed my time in Scotland very much, I did find myself watching bad American sitcoms with a fervor (accompanied of course by popcorn which I discovered at a Pakistani shop, which I treasured as it is one of my favorites and popcorn in Scotland is usually served sugared!). I regularly watched these re-runs which I would never have watched when I lived in America, but since they reminded me of home -- since they were "tokens" -- I watched them without fail.

I now also realize that I, in all likelihood, am not the only one who has held unsure perceptions of other cultures. Furthermore, had I not traveled abroad, I would probably hold the same attitudes today. As not everyone has had the

10

opportunity to be immersed in other cultures, I would like to encourage students to travel abroad, but not without first being informed of all of the psychological aspects -- both wonderful and disturbing -- involved in such a venture. As Copeland and Griggs state, "Fortunately, culture shock is predictable, patterned, and manageable. If you are prepared, you can control it. If you don't take steps to deal with it, it can be expensive in time, money and heartache (1985, p.196)." If students preparing to travel abroad were more informed of the psychological aspects involved, perhaps their entire experience would consist of much more pleasure and enjoyment and much less stress and confusion. This is my goal.

There are many measures which may be taken in order to prepare students for the emotional aspects which may accompany travel abroad -- the greatest of these is information, for it is widely known that knowledge is power. These recommendations based on the review of the literature and personal experience should help in preparation for encountering another culture.

One piece of information which is essential for a person planning to stay in another country for an extended period of time is knowledge of the host culture. I agree with the suggestion made by Gao and Gudykunst (1990) that such knowledge can be obtained through the "mass media, books, magazines, talking to people who have been to the culture, talking to host nationals, and through observation in the host culture" (p.313). I used such strategies in the manner described by the authors -- both prior to departure and after I had arrived in Scotland;

11

however, the key to this approach is that the information must be <u>accurate</u>.

Another factor which proved very helpful to me in adjusting to my host culture was favorable contact. "Favorable contact, as used in Gudykunst and Hammer's (1988) theory, means contact that occurs between people of equal status, is intimate rather than casual, is pleasant rather than unpleasant, and in which the individuals have common goals (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990, p.314). I became quite close with some girls in my psychology class in Scotland. We studied together, and they also took me out and introduced me to many of the local customs. I felt much more comfortable as a result of their guidance, and I believe that it was this contact which helped me to adjust so quickly to the Scottish culture. Thus, based upon the theory set forth by Gudykunst & Hammer and upon personal experience, it is recommended that students living within another culture establish favorable contact with "native" people; this will make them feel more comfortable, thereby aiding the process of adaptation.

How do we come to hold our beliefs concerning other cultures? When I was growing up I always thought of kinship in terms of people "being like me." Somehow this seems to be the normal attitude of children. It explains a child's shock upon first seeing someone of a different race, for example. Not that such an attitude is taught. As children, we are often automatically put into groups of people "like us." Thus, one can see how an attitude of perceiving people of different cultures (not only abroad but in our own country as well) as

12

<u>other</u>, and consequently feeling alienated from them, may easily

be the result of a life -- or at least a childhood -- spent

with <u>like</u> people. As if this course of events were not enough

to predetermine such views, as adults we tend to surround

ourselves with similar people because we do not enjoy being

disagreed with and need our views to be validated.

Perhaps this is how I came to hold my own beliefs regarding

kinship and other cultures, as I cannot recall a time when anyone

sat me down to explain to me which people I should consider

"my kin." However, it is interesting that this has never come

to my attention until now -- that I have never really changed

my views concerning kinship on such a big scale until now, at

age 21, after having spent 10 months in another country with

people whom I had once considered "other."

For example, I am ashamed to admit that, at one time, I

viewed the struggle in South Africa as "just another problem;"

I wasn't considerably concerned with their plight because I

felt alienated from them. Therefore, I did not feel it was

my responsibility to concern myself with "their problems" taking

place halfway around the world. However, after having spent

nearly a year in Scotland with two wonderful South Africans,

I see the whole situation with new eyes -- more knowledgeable

and caring eyes. In short, I now feel much closer to the

situation there -- more kin to the people -- because I learned

to accept a broader range of people as "like me," simply as

a result of exposure.

An even stronger example for me is the bond that I feel

13

I now share with Malaysians. When I reached my "flat" at Strathclyde and knocked on the door, a very small, middle-aged Asian woman answered. She immediately whisked me in, fixed me a snack (although it was a sardine sandwich and Ovaltine!) and immediately made me feel welcome -- such is the Malaysian custom. Once inside I found that I would be sharing the apartment with not one but three Malaysian women (teachers whom the Malaysian government had sent to Scotland for a two-year program to learn to teach English as a second language (TESOL) back in their own country). As a result of their positions, they spoke English quite well, and they were very friendly. Little did I know that living with these three women would completely change my perspective and preconceptions about Asian people (beliefs which I did not even realize I held!).

Before my overseas experience, I was blind to cultures other than my own. I feel this blindness arose out of lack of exposure to such people. I also feel that this phenomenon can be extended to most if not all people: We are often not aware of what is going on around us unless it directly affects us. We often have blinders on not only to the rest of the world but sometimes more specifically to those "different" people around us -- in our own country, perhaps in our own hometown. I am as guilty of this as the next person. Sometimes it seems that it is much easier to remain indifferent than to take the time to understand and come to terms with cultural differences.

My experience last year has taught me what it takes for me to come to terms with and overcome such differences: exposure,

14

time, and most importantly an open mind and a willingness and eagerness to understand and learn about another culture, coupled with a respect for values and beliefs which may differ from my own. These are the ingredients in my recipe for overcoming feelings of alienation and gaining a sense of kinship with those whom I had once seen as "other" -- with those I had before seen not necessarily with uncaring but with indifferent eyes. With each new experience I am coming closer and closer to what I believe to be the bottom line, and it is a simple as what we were taught in vacation Bible school as very young children: We <u>are</u> all brothers and sisters. We are all "kin." And what separates us is a misunderstanding of the varying cultures which different groups have accepted as their own throughout the years -- differences which need not alienate us but which can draw us closer through learning about one another if we can only take the time to <u>understand</u>.

In conclusion, travel abroad is an important way in which one may learn of other cultures, which is essential today more than ever as the world is becoming smaller and smaller day by day. But such travel must not be jumped into blindly. Proper preparation must take place, along with a realization that psychological changes <u>will</u> take place. Both perceptions of other cultures and individual personality may change as a result of such travels, and with proper preparation and foresight, this can be a definite change for the better!

REFERENCES

Copeland, L. & Griggs, L. Going International. New York: Random
     House, 1985.

Gao, G. & Gudykunst, W.B. (1990). Uncertainty, Anxiety, &
     Adaptation. International Journal of Intercultural
     Relations, 14, 301-317.

Gurman, E.B. (1989). Travel Abroad: A Way to Increase
     Creativity? Educational Research Quarterly, 13(3), 13-16.

Kracke, W. (1987). Encounter with Other Cultures: Psychological
     & Epistimological Aspects. Ethos, 15(1), 58-81.

Nelson, G.L. (1992). The Relation Between the use of Personal
     Cultural Examples in International Teaching Assistants'
     Lectures and Uncertainty Reduction, Student Attitude,
     Student Recall, and Ethnocentrism. International Journal
     of Intercultural Relations, 16, 33-52.

Stitsworth, M.H. (1989). Personal Changes Associated With a
     Sojourn in Japan. The Journal of Social Psychology, 129(2),
     213-224.

The Pryor Report. (1985). Creativity on the go, 1(9), 7.
     Shawnee Mission, KS: Fred Pryor Seminars, Inc.