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Reentry shock

– are there country-specific variables regarding  
voluntary work?

A case study.

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Statement of Authorship

## 1. Introduction

More and more people are going abroad considering our increased globalised world and, with it, the indistinctness of boundaries. Often stays abroad are a prerequisite for applying for certain studies or jobs. The various advantages of a stay abroad are always emphasized. On the contrary, the negative consequences are rarely discussed. One of these negative effects is the reentry shock. Reentry shock, reverse culture shock, counter culture shock, reentry adjustment – these terms are all synonyms for the same process. “The first assumption is that reentry is one aspect of an often complex intercultural phenomenon and must be considered as such” (Martin & Harrell 2004, 311). This phenomenon discusses the process of coming back home after working or studying in another country and not being able to connect to the own culture again.

Merely skipping along the surface of another culture, for example as a tourist, does not provoke reentry issues. Immersion is what sets study abroad apart from other forms of travel and contributes to the complexity of reentry (Gray & Savicki 2015, 264).

Reentry is accompanied by a previous immersion in another country or culture and is therefore not a side effect of simple travel. Particularly affected are people who work abroad for a while, students doing a semester abroad or those doing volunteer work in another country. The reentry of volunteers will be highlighted in this paper. Despite the increasing amount of people working abroad the importance of the topic is often overlooked. Most people do not deal with the tropes of reentry or know nothing about them. To help these people, more research is needed to improve knowledge about this phenomenon and to make future returnees aware of it.

This work deals with the meaning of reentry shock and how it occurs, its symptoms and what strategies exist to deal with it. Above all, the scientific background is to be examined. In this context, the various influences of the volunteers' characteristics and various situational variables are also discussed. The focus of this papers survey in particular was directed towards the latter, whereby a questionnaire was used to determine whether these variables are country-specific or not. This was conducted as part of a qualitative survey.

## **2. Reentry shock – an explanation**

To understand the issue of reverse culture shock in its entirety, it's important to get an insight on the subject. In the following chapter I will point out the process of reentry with the help of the W-curve, it's difficulties compared to the culture shock, the symptoms and ways to cope with reentry.

### **2.1 Explanation based on the W-curve**

Returning individuals go “through a predictable series of stages in transferring from a domestic to an international assignment and back home again” (Adler 1981, 342). The W-curve hypothesis by Gullahorn and Gullahorn was established in 1963 and describes these stages. It is an extension of the U-curve hypothesis by Lysgaard.

The U-curve is a model to explain the process of culture shock in the host country. In the beginning, the sojourner is excited and has a very positive feeling towards the new country and culture. The honeymoon phase is followed by a low. This low is the so-called culture shock. The volunteer is confronted with cultural, linguistic and social differences that make him or her lose ground. This is particularly the case when home and host countries display significant differences. After a certain period of shock, the process of recovery and adaptation begins. You get used to the cultural differences which are followed by integration into the host country.

The second U completes the W curve and follows the same pattern as the U-curve. It describes the process of adaptation and integration back home. The pace of a reentry process can vary immensely. One person feels good after a month, others need more time to readjust. In the initial phase, the average of repatriates' mood is on a high level for about one month after coming home. From the second to the fourth month after arrival, the returnees are at their lowest point in terms of their mood. Feelings of sadness, alienation and loneliness are predominantly. In addition, there are other symptoms which will be discussed later. Around the fifth month, the returnee has recovered and is able to reintegrate into the home culture and procedures. Ideally, the skills learned abroad can be incorporated into the daily life.

## **2.2 Difficulties of reentry**

“Re-entry into the original culture was found to be a more difficult transition than was the move to the foreign culture” (Adler 1981, 341). The main difficulty here is that the problems of reverse culture shock “which arise upon returning home, are largely unexpected” (Szkudlarek 2010, 2). Considering the expected culture shock, a sojourner normally prepares oneself in matters of culture, climate, food, etc. of the host country one is going to live in. You prime yourself for your time abroad because you expect it to be new, unfamiliar as well as challenging, but there is no need seen to prepare for coming back home afterwards. The returnee does not “expect anything unfamiliar when returning home. The present study indicates that returnees did not anticipate culture shock or trauma. Some planned to “just slip into” their previous life styles [...]” (Adler 1981, 350). Another difficulty is the shifted start of the reentry shock. As seen before, reverse culture shock begins around one month after arrival. In the beginning, the repatriate feels great about being back and is excited, but after this “honeymoon” phase it might feel like losing ground in the environment that should feel familiar. “[...] the returnee is caught between the two cultures of home and host country.” (Gaw 2000, 86).

Reverse culture shock is a personal process. The individual has changed, consciously or unconsciously, in the months of his stay abroad. In addition, however, it is possible that people in the home country have also developed further. These changes have happened independently of each other and especially the changes of the returnee are often difficult to understand. As normal as changes are, they are not expected to affect the returnee so strongly. For someone who has not had the same experiences, it is difficult to understand the intensity of the stay abroad. Moreover, it is often incomprehensible why it causes such problems for the returnee. “If culture shock feels like an expansion, reverse culture shock can feel like an implosion” (Rybol 2016, chap. 1). The unexpectedness of the integrating problems might cause a strange feeling. It is expected to be easy - not only by others, but also by oneself and it’s hard to accept that coming home is harder than expected. Home comers as well as family and friends of the same person should be sensitive and open-minded towards the returnee.

### 2.3 Symptoms of reentry

There are many symptoms that can occur in the process of returning home. – it's experienced differently by everyone. In view of time and appearance, it can occur for various lengths and intensities. “[...] some individuals may experience few, if any, effects of reentry, while others appear to have problems ranging from a few months to a year or longer” (Gaw 2000, 84). A reentry shock often occurs when the person was very integrated into the host country. However, the absence of reentry shocks is no proof that the person was not completely immersed in their life abroad. Reentry may appear in various ways. Returnees might feel disoriented or frustrated, an increased amount of boredom, insecurity and tiredness isn't uncommon as well. Some returnees might experience a sense of alienation, loneliness and withdrawal. In addition to that, a decreased sense of belonging regarding family and friends can occur. Against the odds, going abroad has not only positive effect on students, but also negative impact within the reentry process. “Their time reintegrating into their home environment and continuing their education was often marked by sadness, a sense of loss and practical problems” (Porsch & Lüling 2017, 259).

It is not only the affective part that make re-entry difficult. Also, in view of the practical part and the environment, like home, work or university, different tasks can be more challenging than usual, leading to individuals closing oneself off from them. Many returnees experience reverse homesickness, a feeling of not wanting to be in the home country as well as a serious need to go back to the host country. They feel overstrained and overwhelmed even by simple tasks. Another aspect, that makes alienation even more intense, is the communication in the returnees' L<sup>1</sup>. The person might have spoken another language while being abroad or even learned a completely new one. Consequently, the returnee is not as fluent as before and has to get used to it again. The “continuum of reaction to reentering the home culture” is wide and this diversity makes it even harder to react to it (Gaw 2000, 84). The reactions are individual and it's almost impossible to categorise them properly. In many cases, it's “difficult, uncomfortable, hard to live with and a lot of times hard to understand” (Rosenberger 2017, 95). Therefore, the possibilities to cope with these symptoms are multifaceted and it's helpful for returnees as well as for their social surrounding to know them. It is a way to make reentry a smoother process.

## **2.4 Solutions for coping with reentry**

There are different ways to make reentering the home country easier and ideally, to cope with the reentry. The returnee possibly made friends in the host country and misses them a lot. These might be nationals one lived and worked with or fellow returnees from the same or other countries. It is important to stay in touch with them. There may be opportunities to meet in one's own country or in another country. These people understand the process the returnee is going through and they can exchange experiences about problems and find solutions together. On another note, keeping track on news about the host country during their stay can help. That way the returnee feels involved in the life there and it is also good as a basis of communication with host-country individuals.

Trying to counteract one's feelings in any way is ineffective. Contrary to all expectations, one may feel alienated and uncomfortable and it is important to understand that this is part of the process. It takes time to get used to the environment, culture and lifestyle again. Reflecting on the experience abroad can be very profitable for the process of re-entry. This reflection can take place in written or oral form. One can write a report about one's own experiences or give lectures in seminars, libraries or schools. Preparing others for similar situations can advance one's own progress. Moreover, it is important to use the new knowledge acquired in the host country. It makes no difference whether this happens in a social, cultural or scientific context. "Living in another culture means you'll absorb some of that culture and you'll incorporate it into a new version of yourself" (Rybol 2016, chap. 5). In the larger context, turning away from one's own experiences and looking at and evaluating them separately does not bring any added value for the returnee. These experiences are part of the system and can be processed most successfully if they are integrated.

Dealing with one's own reentry shocks does not work for everyone in the same way. The handling of this depends also on the evaluation of the stay abroad and in which relation the homecomer stands to the return.

### **3. Modes of reentry**

To classify different ways of coping with reentry, Adler established the four modes of reentry. It's designed as four-element matrix with two dimensions: "the overall attitude is designated "optimistic" and "pessimistic," and the specific attitude is termed "active" or "passive"" (Adler 1981, 353). Four different types of returnees result from this matrix: proactive, resocialised, alienated and rebellious. Within the framework of this model, active returnees are interested in changing their environment as well as fitting themselves into the home-country association. Looking at passive returnees, on the other hand, facilitation of their own re-entry cannot be observed. "[...] Optimistically oriented repatriates evaluate their reentry positively, while their pessimistic colleagues have a negative opinion about this process (Szkudlarek 2010, 5). Proactive returnees are optimistic and active. They set external confirmation and awareness of their development first. They can use and integrate the skills they learned abroad. In the resocialised mode, repatriates are optimistic and passive. As a result, they recognise skills they have learned abroad, but make only limited use of them. They tend to control the organisation in their own country in order to better find their way around. Alienated returnees find it difficult to recognize skills they have acquired abroad. Moreover, they do not use them. They tend to separate themselves from their own country and culture. The last mode is called the rebellious mode. Rebellious returnees do not adapt any learned abilities and therefore cannot apply them. They are likely to distance themselves from the experience abroad and not integrate it into their identity. The basis of this empirical model was tested by involving returning students and international workers. The model and its applicability were confirmed with different groups.

The four modes described depend on a variety of aspects, which are described in the following chapter.



#### **4. Different aspects of reentry**

According to Martin and Harrell, there are three different aspects that appear in the face of reentry. These three aspects are the affective, the cognitive and the behavioural aspect.

The affective aspect deals with the “psychological wellbeing of the returning individuals” (Szkudlarek 2010, 3). Considering this, emotions and sentimental resonances are part of the reentry transition. According to the W-curve theory the sojourner’s emotions are prognosticated to change in the process of coming home. The four stages - honeymoon, reverse culture shock, recovery and reintegration - are a huge part that accompany returnees in their emotional reaction to their personal reentry experience. Black, Gregersen and Mendenhall found that 70% of the returnees surveyed felt very uneasy about their return. They also concluded that returning home is often harder to cope with than the actual going abroad. Further research has revealed psychologically relevant symptoms that can result in clinical depression and a degree of grief experienced comparably to the grief felt when a loved one is lost.

The second aspect dealt with is the cognitive aspect. Within this aspect there are two models relevant. The first one being the Expectations Model. It clarifies the correlation between the returnees’ expectations of re-entering the home country and the actual transition. It also implies that the pre-reentry expectations influence the process of re-adaption to the home-country environment. Therefore, before re-entering it's important to adjust the expectations of home surroundings and make them more realistic. “A ‘reality-check’, however, often reveals that both the home-environment and the returning individual have changed substantially during the period of intercultural sojourn” (Szkudlarek 2010, 4). This awareness is crucial to adapt the expectation properly in advance.

The second model is the Cultural Identity Model. This presupposes that the returnee has changed both in general as well as regarding cultural identity and his own catalogue of values. Sussman developed a model with four types of changed identities: affirmative, subtractive, additive and global. Sojourners with an affirmative identity still display a stronger bond with their home-country culture compared to their host-country culture. They rate their own culture positively and keep their connection to it. Therefore, they adapt less to the host country and its culture and coming home is seen in a positive light. Subtractive and additive identifiers are likely to adapt highly to the host-country culture

and hence feel an increased level of distress upon returning home. However, there are different reasons for this. In relation to the home country and the inhabitants, the subtractive returnees would feel alienated or disaffected. This is because they suspect that their fellows no longer perceive them as typical members of the home culture. They have a feeling of identity loss. Additive identifiers are also affected by distress, but not because of a loss of identity, but in consequence of the internalization of the other culture. Last, the global identifier is described.

Global identifiers are often sojourners who have had multiple international experiences. For them, moving in and out of cultures only embellishes the sense of belonging to a global community. Adaptations to the host country, for this category of sojourner, are often instrumental and repatriation predicted to be a moderate or positive experience (Sussman 2002, 395.).

The behavioural aspect is the third one referring to the three aspects of repatriation. As expected by the host-environment, sojourners start to adapt themselves to the necessary behaviour. In consequence, the own attitudes are forgotten and replaced by the new ones. In the readjustment process, the returnee has the chance to integrate these new behaviours in the home-country environment, but also has to relearn the ones expected. In the best case, it is possible for the returnee to link host and home-country elements.

These three aspects occur in various gradations. They are intensified or reduced by personal and situational factors. Therefore, the next chapter will focus on the role and importance of individual influences of reentry especially the volunteers' characteristics and the situational variables.

## **5. Individual influences of reentry**

“Re-entry has been identified as a major personnel issue [...]” (Adler 1981. 343). As described in previous chapters, every repatriate experiences the reentry process in a different way as well as with varying intensity

A substantial number of studies related to the reentry phenomenon focuses on sojourners’ characteristics and situational factors of repatriation. Research shows that a number of factors can influence the distress experienced upon return, as well as psychological readjustment and overall satisfaction with the transition (Szkudlarek 2010, 5).

The following chapter describes how versatile the influences are in relation to the reentry shock. The characteristics and situational variables used for a more detailed description are taken from Betina Szkudlarek's 2010 article "Reentry-a review of literature", which appeared in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations in the same year. This article was used as a basis for the following analysis. It deals with the question of whether there are country-specific variables relating to volunteering abroad. This text was chosen because of the large number of sources used for the research. It therefore testifies to a broad scientific spectrum in the context of re-entry research. The different characteristics of the volunteers, which can influence the reentry experience, are also worked out with the help of further literature. Moreover, the situational variables from Szkudlarek's text are described, but also serve as a basis for the survey conducted with eleven respondents who have volunteered in various countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

### **5.1 Impact by volunteers’ characteristics**

According to Szkudlarek, there are seven characteristics that have an impact on the reentry process - gender, age, personality, religion, marital status, socioeconomic status and prior intercultural experience and reentry.

The first characteristic that is mentioned is gender. Various empirical studies have confirmed that men and women experience reentry shock differently. “In general, females are seen to have more problems with re-adaption to family than males” (Brabant et al. 1990, 390). It is precisely because of gender that predictions are made and therefore it is

one of the most important characteristics in connection with re-entry. “Gama and Pedersen (1997) describe family challenges experienced by returning women and their struggle to fulfil their relatives’ expectations of their roles upon return” (Szkudlarek 2010, 5). For instance, Sussman on the other hand noted that the alleged correlation between sex and reentry did not confirm shock. According to Martin and Harrell, there is a need for further investigations in this aspect of research.

“Age is the second most frequently researched reentry variable” (Szkudlarek 2010, 5). Various studies have shown that there is a correlation between the age and intensity of the reentry shock. With increasing age, the extent of reentry shock decreases. Accordingly, younger returnees experience it to be stronger. This is explained with the process of identity finding. Older volunteers already have a stronger identity. Despite immersion in the culture, older volunteers no longer adopt many values and behaviours comparatively to younger volunteers. The appropriation of cultural aspects and the ability to adapt is more educated among younger volunteers. This leads to even more substantial changes in the identity during the stay abroad. The transformations can make it difficult to re-enter one's own country.

“Several empirical attempts have been made to explore the influence of personality traits on different aspects of repatriation” (Szkudlarek 2010, 6). According to Martin and Harrell, there are three relevant factors that appear in relation to reentry shock. The first is the openness, which enhances the ability of acceptance or receptiveness to change or new ideas. The individual personality strength of a returnee, is influenced by the third factor, the positivity of a volunteer. Based on own studies, Black et al. are convinced that a strong self-image has the greatest influence on the process of re-entry.

The fourth researched characteristic is the impact of a volunteers’ religion. It can play an important role in dealing with the affective and psychological aspects of re-entry after a stay abroad. “[...] relationship difficulties might be a result of newly acquired liberal behaviours and values, which conflict with those of family members back in the home-country” (Szkudlarek 2010, 6). In this case, conflicts in this respect would make it unnecessarily difficult for the returnee to reintegrate.

Szkudlarek's article discusses marital status as the fifth characteristic. In the process of returning home, single returnees are more susceptible to these symptoms. Social difficulties are also more frequent, as well as greater identification with the culture of the

host country. The immersion takes place more intensively and the re-entry into the own country becomes more complex. In contrast, married fellows or those who have a stable relationship have fewer problems. This may be since the strong bond is also maintained during the stay abroad. Thus, the immersion happens not so intensively or because the partner is able to understand the repatriates' situation in a better way. Therefore, re-entering the home country is easier for married returnees.

Socio-economic status is a characteristic that cannot be fully associated with the reentry process due to a lack of research. Since it is mentioned in the underlying literature, however, it will be included. The research revealed a decline in social status after the re-entry. As this is a characteristic that is important to many returnees, Szkudlarek believes that further research should be done in this area to achieve valid results.

The last volunteers' characteristic mentioned are prior intercultural transitions and re-entries of the repatriates. In relation to cultural transition, Martin and Harrell concluded that previous intercultural experiences should have a positive influence. So far, studies have confirmed this. However, too little research was carried out to obtain meaningful results.

In addition to the characteristics of the volunteers, there are also situational variables, which are explained in the following chapter and supplemented with examples from the own survey.

## **5.2 Impact by situational variables**

Regarding the situational variables, Szkudlarek has also listed various extrinsic factors that influence the intensity of the reentry shock. The seven she mentions in her article are the length of the intercultural stay, the cultural distance, the time since return, the contact with host-country individuals, the contact with home-country individuals, the attitudes of home-country individuals towards the returnees and the housing conditions. In view of the importance, supervision was added as a variable by the interviewer.

To clarify the question of whether these variables occur more frequently in specific countries, eleven volunteers were interviewed. This survey was conducted with an open guideline interview in written form. In advance, the participants received information on

the topic of reentry shock in text form. In the following, the variables are explained first and followed by examples from the surveys. Finally, it is evaluated whether a variable can be specifically assigned to certain countries.

The first variable mentioned is the *length of stay* in the host country. Unfortunately, the current results from different studies are inconsistent. Black et al. argue that the longer the repatriate spent time in the host country, the longer is the readjustment process. The major reason for this might be the deeper immersion the longer the stay. Other researchers couldn't find any correlation between the length of stay and reentry shock. After evaluating the questionnaires, it can be said that all respondents feel that the length of time plays a major role. Even if the volunteer did not spend a long period of time in the host country, he or she can still imagine that a longer period would have made it more difficult. One volunteer mentioned that from a certain point in time or after a certain number of months the effect would, in her opinion, have remained the same.

Yes, because I think it took me quite a little time to make myself feel like home in my new surroundings, not like a tourist or a stranger to everyone around me anymore. I think with every day more experiencing the new culture, you get deeper into their thinking, history, values and then even start adapting to that way of thinking, which is a gradual process I guess. (female, 6 months, Philippines)

For sure! The longer I stayed the more I got involved in the culture in my social circle and at work. I also adapted more and more of the African mentality. The bigger the immersion the harder was coming back home. If I had stayed for a shorter period of time; I wouldn't have been immersed so deeply in my environment. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

Yes, to some extent definitely. Although I think it wouldn't have made a big difference if I had stayed for a whole year instead of just 6 months. Six months is a reasonable length where you fully adjust to your new home country because you know from the beginning, that you will be there for a while. Had I only stayed a month I might have had less reason to adjust to the new culture; hence my reentry would have been more smoothly. (female, 6 months, Peru)

As several studies have shown, *cultural distance* of home and host country can have an enormous influence on the process of returning home. The higher the cultural differences are, the more complicated is it to adjust to the home culture again. Possible reasons for this are external influences such as the weather and food, but also changes in identity caused by an intensive time abroad. You adopt the norms and values of the new culture into which you have integrated yourself and thereby change your own perspectives and

character. These cultural differences differ for each person - each individual initial situation influences the reentry.

Persons from different parts of the world do not return to the same set of circumstances nor do they face the same set of family obligations. One's culture, or nationality, has long been recognized to be a significant influence in a person's life, [...] (Brabant et al. 1990, 393).

The studies conducted so far can be confirmed within the framework of the own survey. Interestingly, volunteers who have lived in developed countries with western standards, such as Namibia and Costa Rica, have recognized no connection between reentry and cultural distance. However, the returnees from less developed countries, such as Laos, Tanzania and Peru, have cited the differences as a major influence.

Laos and Germany are two totally different countries. Laos is a developing country, so a lot of people are very poor and have no to not much education at all. In addition, they value other things than we do in the western world. So yes, it had a huge impact when I came home because I had a completely different life in Laos. (female, 5 months, Laos)

Since Namibia used to be a German colony, the cultural differences were not too outstanding for me. That was mainly because I did an internship at a German radio station and so was active in the German community for the most part. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

Extremely distant. It is as if Tanzania is a whole different world. Due to being in Tanzania for a long time, I became used to the culture and preferred it to my own. It was different – exciting but relaxed at the same time, busy but unstressful. Everything had its own pace, and life is how it is out there. There is no rush, no concept of time. However, coming back to England, it's the opposite. Everyone is always busy, always running around, always some feelings of stress. People moan about what they have and don't have and for me this was very difficult to re-adjust to. I didn't realise properly what my own culture was like until I had returned. (female, 10 months, Tanzania)

I don't think the cultures are that different. I believe Costa Rica has a very Western culture. But of course, there are differences. E.g. regarding punctuality, the food, the living standard, the calmness of the people... (female, 2,5 months, Costa Rica)

In Peru people are more open and friendly towards strangers. This is something I missed when coming back to Germany. Although you can approach people on the street, they will probably first give you a strange look before helping you. (female, 6 months, Peru)

Another factor that can influence the reentry process is the *time since return*. The results of different surveys are inconsistent. Some researchers, such as Gregersen and Stroh, found out that the longer it takes for a returnee to get used to his homeland, the harder it will be to get back to the old daily routine. Difficulties arise in relation to work or study. It takes more time to acclimatize. In contrast, Cox, for example, found no significant link

between the two factors. Such contrary results make the validity of the W-curve appear questionable.

The results of the own survey were inconsistent as well.

I went to the Philippines right after graduating from school, so when I came back, I didn't have a settled "life" there waiting for me, because everything was changing anyway. When I came back to Germany, most of my friends still were abroad, I had no school anymore and tried to find a job to gain some money. So, I had no routine at all, which I liked very much, because I changed so much, my old life wouldn't fit me anymore and I wanted change anyway. I think my readjustment is still going on, always comparing the German culture with the Philippines lifestyle. (female, 6 months, Philippines – 5 years ago)

As already stated I had not forgotten the German culture and the way they interact socially. Therefore, I was able to "switch to German-mode" relatively quickly. I'm not saying I did not miss the way the Lao look at life because I really enjoyed that, but I knew what to expect when I got back home. (female, 2 months, Laos)

It took me about one week to get back to 'normal' because I had to work for my finals at university. On the one hand, it gave me the chance to readjust quickly, on the other hand I missed the opportunity to rethink my stay abroad. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

I have been back for 3 months now and still very much missing Tanzania and have plans to go back after I finish my last year at University. I start university again in October – another 3 months away. I actually think that having too much time to re-adjust makes it more difficult. As I only work weekends, study an online English teaching course and go to the gym during the week, and all my friends have graduated a year earlier than me and have jobs far from our home town, I find I am not doing as much as I was before leaving for Tanzania. So, coming back, I have been bored on occasions and have found myself dreaming of the day when I return to Tanzania. However, I do think that when I go back to university, it will make things easier. I will be surrounded by my friends, busy studying for my degree and playing sport. I will not have a lot of free time like I do now, and I think that will be a good distraction for me. (female, 10 months, Tanzania)

It didn't take me long to readjust. Again, I think it is different when being abroad for a longer time. I do believe that it can be harder to reintegrate at work when the readjustment process takes longer. (female, 2,5 months, Costa Rica)

It is noticeable that especially those who spent a shorter period in the host country did not have great difficulties in the time after coming home. Volunteers who have been abroad longer and have become more deeply rooted in the foreign culture have had major problems with the readjustment process.

The fourth situational variable mentioned is the *contact to host-country individuals* while being in the country. "Researchers argue that the frequency and quality of interactions with host-country nationals are directly related to the expatriation adjustment" (Szkudlarek 2010, 7). An increased contact to the nationals can aggravate the reentry



problems because it means a deeper immersion into the host-country culture. Others were not able to find any correlation and therefore there is a need for further investigations in this part of reentry.

Yes, I worked with them very closely every day and we also went to their houses (met their families) and had a real personal relationship. I think it affected my reentry because they showed me their way of living which is completely different to ours. (For example, the importance of family and friends.) (female, 5 months, Laos)

About half of my friends were Indian, half were German. While I couldn't tell whether my relationships to the former affected my re-entry; they certainly increased my exposure to Indian culture significantly. Through them I was 'deeper' in the local culture and certainly further detached from Western/European/Expat life. Thinking that I had therefore more to think about and got to know different perspectives; I'd say that these relationships were very important for my development. At the same time, these are the relationships that remained in India while my Western friends have for the most part returned to Europe as well. I couldn't tell whether the fact to still have people in the host country makes the re-entry harder or easier. (male, 12 months, India)

Through my internship I had a lot of contact to German-Namibians. I even had a very close relationship with my moderation colleague - we still have contact and have never lost sight of each other. It's great to know that on the other side of the world there's always someone you can rely on. This has made me a bit calmer after my return. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

I did get into contact with a lot of locals and also formed friendships with them. However overall it was probably 50% nationals and 50% people from other nations (mostly Europeans) that I spent my time with. Therefore, there was still a continuing connection to my home culture, which probably made adjusting back in Germany more fluent. (female, 6 months, Peru)

Except for volunteers in Peru and Costa Rica, respondents agree that contact with home-country individuals influences the reentry process. This influence is not always assessed negatively. On the positive side, you also have friends in other countries you can rely on. They made it possible to build a home apart from home. These friends can also be a reason to plan to visit the host country again. The prospect of returning can reduce the reentry shock. Often, the long distance, which separates each other, is rated negatively. You miss the host-country individuals, and this can intensify the reentry shock.

In the topic of contact, the volunteers were also asked about the *contact to home-country individuals*. Contact with them is seen as a major influence in the acclimatisation process. The empathy of these people is increased because they were continuously reported about their experiences. "Research shows that maintaining personal relationships with home-country individuals during foreign sojourns can have a substantial influence on reducing the distress of reentry" (Szkudlarek 2010, 7).

My family came and visited me during my stay. I think it made it a lot easier for them to understand my strange feelings back home in Germany, because they once got an impression about the culture which had an influence on me for more than half a year. And it also made me feel better, because I knew they knew. (female, 6 months, Philippines)

Yes, I had regular contact with my boyfriend, family and some friends. Although they did not visit me in Laos they knew what my life abroad was like therefore were able to help me in readjusting to the life back home. (female, 2 months, Laos)

I was in contact but, except with my boyfriend who actually came to visit me, really rarely. I face-timed him once a week, talked to my parents probably about 4 times over the period of 6 months. But a couple of times a week over WhatsApp. I don't think it changes anything for me after coming home. (female, 6 months, Namibia)

I didn't have contact with my family and because of the conditions in Tanzania more or less no contact to my friends. It felt like staying on an island without anyone from my normal life. Coming back from that island no one knew what I was talking about and nobody was able to relate to my stories and feelings. (male, 3 months, Tanzania)

I didn't have continuous contact with friends. I sent out an update now and then and skyped with my parents a few times. However, for a whole month, I got to travel with a friend that I knew from school. It was good to discuss with her the experiences we had prior, while working in the country. (female, 6 months, Peru)

Again, it is significant that volunteers living in more developed countries, such as Namibia and Peru, have not experienced the influence of the variable so clearly. The returnees from less advanced countries, such as Tanzania, Laos and the Philippines, have stated more strongly that the lack of contact has made re-entry more difficult. Increased contact, on the other hand, made the transition easier.

The sixth variable discussed in Szkudlarek's text is *the attitude of home-country individuals towards the returnee*. Research shows that there are more negative reactions towards returnees like a lack of interest. While the repatriate was abroad, the home-country individuals might have changed as well, they mind their own business and envy has an impact on the reactions as well. Promotion, sympathy and understanding are often missing what makes reentry harder than it must be.

They were really happy, but this was gone after some days and everything just went back to normal. It was as if I had never left. (female, 5 months, Laos)

I expected the interest of people who haven't had the same experience or who have never delved into another culture profoundly to be rather shallow. Thus, talking about the Taj Mahal, spicy Indian food and summer heat became the main topics. However, I didn't blame anybody for not going deeper since

it was quite clear to me that people at home live in another reality. And, that's probably an important point, I had a number of friends at home who were abroad as well, some of them in India / South Asia, with whom I could talk extensively about all our experiences. (male, 12 months, India)

That's a very exciting question, they were definitely happy and glad that I was back. A very good friend picked me up at the airport, which was great for me. Unfortunately, my parents were unable to come to Frankfurt, but they welcomed me back home with open arms. Interest differs a little, some asked, some were just happy that I was back. It's often difficult to tell things you've only experienced alone that were great for you. I was always very happy about a short question after my return "How was it?", but it doesn't have to degenerate into deep conversations, that's completely okay. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

My time in Tanzania was full of adventures on an everyday schedule. Safari, Malaria, Kiswaeli. So much more happened in these three months and I wanted to tell everyone and expected everyone to be interested. People only were interested in the normal touristic stuff. Did you see lions, zebras? No one was interested in my everyday work, the impact I had in Tanzania and the way it changed me. (male, 3 months, Tanzania)

Yes, the excitement was big. But it didn't take long until things got back to normal. Both for me and for others. (female, 2,5 months, Costa Rica)

Opinions are again diverging on this issue. Most volunteers reported that interest and excitement subsided after a short time and that this made re-entry difficult for them. Others were able to understand the low level of interest and were therefore able to arrange well. This result proves what various researchers have concluded from their own investigations.

Some scholars request that reentry communication can be problematic, but others evidence suggests that interpersonal communication and relationships with friends, family and colleagues are ultimately facilitative (Martin & Harrell, 2004, 319).

Adjusting back to the home-country life can also be connected to the *housing conditions*. A higher or lower standard of living means that you have to get used to the conditions in your home country again.

The volunteers interviewed all had the same opinion. The housing conditions influence the reentry immensely. This influence did not necessarily have to be negative, but it often made volunteers aware of the positive aspects of their home-country conditions. No specification for certain countries was discernible.

In Germany I live alone in a small flat and in Laos we shared a very big house, so it was weird to be alone after such a long time. (female, 2 months, Laos)

The differed a lot. I was sharing my room in a student dormitory that was far from the material comfort of my German home. During my re-entry I certainly felt that what was seen as 'normal' or 'standard' at

home was overrated. I guess these huge German supermarkets made the biggest impression on me (despite the fact that there are similar supermarkets in India – I just usually went to the market to buy my stuff). I was, however, happy to have my own room when coming back. (male, 12 months, India)

My personal living standard in Namibia was much higher than the average, but still at one point I missed my own place, especially my personal space since I lived where I worked. That made coming home way easier. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

The conditions in Namibia were very different, for example the lack of water or the furnishing of the apartment. It was amazing how much you appreciated things after your return that were natural for you before. (male, 3 months, Namibia)

They did differ a lot: e.g. no hot shower! I believe I perceived things differently when I got back and was more grateful for what I had and what I used to take as a matter of course. (female, 2,5 months, Costa Rica)

*Supervision* in the pre-, while- and post-phase can be helpful in the process of coping reentry. Problematic aspects are constantly discussed, processes and possible problems are monitored. In many cases, supervision and reentry training are often missing.

Reentering with no reentry training often means that the intercultural sojourn becomes encapsulated, tucked away in the mind of the sojourner, and the opportunity is lost to integrate the personal growth and professional knowledge into the sojourner's current life (Martin and Harrell 2004, 311).

According to Martin and Harrell, returning home can best be mastered with the help of supervision and training. The process is most successful if it is supported by courses or trainings provided. These trainings should take place before and after returning home to prepare the volunteer, but also to support him or her in the processing and evaluation of the stay abroad. Further research was continued, and it turned out that participation in reentry workshops was also very positively received in other cases.

Sie stellten fest, dass rückkehrende Austauschstudierende die Teilnahme an einem Reentry-Workshop überwiegend als wertvoll empfanden, weil dieser ihnen half, abstrakte Gedanken zu konkretisieren, neue Sichtweisen zu entwickeln und ihre Erfahrungen in einer Gruppe ‚Gleichgesinnter‘ zu thematisieren (Porsch & Lüling 2017, 266).

In the own surveys, contrary opinions have emerged.

I didn't have any supervision before or after. And honestly, I don't think that it would have helped, because no one can truly understand what I experienced when I was abroad. (female, 6 months, Philippines)

Taking part in the German weltwärts-Programme, I had a 10-days of seminar before, 1 week during, and 5 days after my stay in India. These seminars were tailored to the needs of volunteers abroad – i.e. we

talked about culture shock, re-entry shocks, difficulties while being there, self-reflexion, privileges and political/ economic issues etc. This preparation and, equally important, follow-up meetings were extremely helpful in dealing with coming home. (male, 12 months, India)

I don't think I see the point in that personally. I kind of liked the feeling of missing the life there because that will make me to want to come back. (female, 6 months, Namibia)

I did not have any supervision, but I think it would be very helpful. It is normal to feel frustrated after coming home, but everyone is expecting you to be happy, even yourself. Knowing the reasons behind it would have made it easier to cope with it. (male, 3 months, Tanzania)

I think having some light supervision after my stay would have been nice, just to know that someone knew I wasn't 100% myself and maybe understood a bit how I felt. (female, 10 months, Tanzania)

No, I did not really have that kind of supervision, but I think with my work and surroundings (many other international volunteers) it didn't matter too much. (female, 6 months, Peru)

Opinions on supervision are very diverse. Some volunteers find it unimportant, others would have wished for it and few were looked after in the process and were grateful for it. It is striking that many returnees from culturally more distant countries would have felt or have felt supervision as positive. In addition, the need for support depends on a person's personality and cannot be consistent.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this qualitative study with eleven participants, only a few variables could be assigned to a specific country. This paper argues that instead of presenting variables as country-specific it is more fruitful to link variables to the development standard of the respective country.

First, there are the situational variables that were stated by all participants as a big influence on the reentering process and therefore their reentry shock. These variables are the length of stay and the housing conditions. The variables attitude of home-country individuals towards the returnee and the supervision were not country specific as well. You could argue that these two variables cannot be attributed to any country or culture because they are very personal sensations. This individual assessment varies from one personality to another and cannot be generalised. Cultural distance is one of the variables mentioned as country-specific. The bigger the differences between home and host country

are, the greater the reentry shock. The reverse culture shock was less intense for volunteers from more developed countries like Namibia and Costa Rica. Further, volunteers in less developed countries stated the impact of contact to the home-country individuals as an immense influence on their reentry. Volunteers from culturally closer countries did not perceive this as such. One variable was not country- but time-specific. The variable of time since return was more often an issue when the time in the host country was longer. All repatriates, except the ones from Costa Rica and Peru, noted that the contact to host-country individuals had a great influence on their reentry experience.

Overall the results vary a lot, but still some country specifications are notable. The urgency to continue dealing with the topic scientifically prevails. Especially quantitative studies could lead to more accurate and meaningful results. A study on a larger scale can confirm and validate the results of the survey. Former and further investigations can help to react to this negative aspect of going abroad. In the age of globalisation, the decision to go abroad is becoming increasingly normal. With, the world is losing its borders it is possible for almost everyone to integrate into foreign societies and cultures. The more people are affected by this the more the relevance of this phenomenon increases, so it is worth investing more time and effort in the processes of reentry shock.

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## **Appendix**

- Sample of questionnaire
- Questionnaires of the interviewees
- Sequential analysis of questionnaires