Grief in Returning Sojourners

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ABSTRACT Previous research on those temporarily living in other countries and grief models of culture shock has concentrated on adjustment to the host country and not to returning home. When 207 high school students home for 3–6 months after 1 year overseas responded to a questionnaire assessing psychological adjustment, wellbeing, and grief, we found 61% reported adjustment problems on re-entry. Those saying return was difficult showed significantly lower well-being than those who found it easy. The former did not show less grief than any of the 4 normative loss groups in most of the 9 grief subscales, and were significantly different from a group of non-loss controls on all 5 of the subscales. Results suggest that those sojourners who find returning problematic show grief at levels comparable to those recently experiencing loss from death.

INTRODUCTION

Most research on sojourners, those who temporarily settle in another country, has focused on descriptions and theories to explain the stress of entering the host culture (Ward and Kennedy, 1993a, b, 2001; Pernice et al., 2000), including reports of deterioration in health in up to 25% of sojourners (Carsello and Creaser, 1976). Despite research reports that going away is difficult but returning home may be even more difficult (Adler, 1981; Sussman, 1986), there is much research on the former but little on the latter. Most of the re-entry (to one's own culture) research has been on universityaged students or business people (Inkson et al., 1997; Sussman, 2002; Cox, 2004) and has had a lack of control groups, an absence of standardised psychometric measures (but see Cox, 2004), and a focus on a description of difficulties (Rohrlich, and Martin, 1991) rather than an explanation of the process of re-acculturation back to the home country.

There is little published research on the population of around 10,000 students aged 16 to 18 who travel overseas to host countries annually (but see Rogers and Ward, 1993; Wilson, 1993). In New Zealand alone, there are over 300 annually participating in the American Field Service (AFS, 1996), and in the last 60 years more than 8,000 New Zealanders have travelled overseas on an AFS exchange. Anecdotal reports of returning high school foreign-exchange students highlight difficulty in settling back into their lives in New Zealand. Returnees report surprising difficulties in interpersonal relationships with family and friends, impaired performance in educational and occupational settings, a sense of loss, frustration, and unhappiness (Martin and Harrell, 1996). Often these returnee's would fulfil DSM-IV criteria for an Acculturation Problem, specifically showing adjustment to a different culture characterised by feelings of depersonalisation, derealisation, anxiety, depression and a sense of isolation (Kaplan et al., 1994; DSM IV, 2000 pg. 741). The similarity in these feelings reported by the sojourners to feelings reported after experiencing such a loss was the focus of our study, that those sojourners who find return difficult were experiencing a loss situation similar to that of those recently bereaved, namely grief.

It might be expected that in the high school age group, themes of independence and separation in the process of developing a sense of identity would exacerbate feelings of psychological adjustment, psychological well-being, and grief (Chamove et al., 1991; Wild and Chamove, 1999). Their experience is likely to be even more stressful than the age groups already studied. Because the participants of the present study were both aged in their teens and also unmarried, we expected from previous research a problematic repatriation adjustment Recently Cox (2004) has found just that, repatriation adjustment is more difficult in younger and unmarried individuals.

In an attempt to explain re-entry adjustment to the New Zealand culture in high school students, a hypothesis was generated to see if the "loss" of the host culture could produce standard symptoms of grieving and if this grieving process would provide a useful model for conceptualising the long term process of

reacculturation back into the home culture. The grief model is a classic interpretation of "culture shock" (Furnham and Bochner, 1986), but no one has extended its applicability to re-entry. It was posited that in the high school age group, themes of independence and separation in the process of developing a sense of identity would exacerbate feelings of psychological adjustment, psychological well-being, and grief (Chamove et al., 1991; Wild and Chamove, 1999).

METHOD

Participants: All 300 New Zealand returned AFS students in 1996 were asked to participate[1]. Of 209 (69%) who agreed to participate, 205 returned completed questionnaires—75% female, 25% male. All were high school students and aged either 16 (6%), 17 (34%), or 18 (60%). They all had been back in New Zealand for 3 to 6 months.

A comparison group of 71 high school students from a local high school and of similar age and sex who had not gone on an exchange program filled out questionnaires. Although this comparison group was not a control group and differed from the sojourners in many aspects, it was felt these nonsojourners might be of some interest as a similar group of non-travellers.

Questionnaires: Three questionnaires were used to assess (a) psychological adjustment, (b) psychological wellbeing, and (c) grief in the sojourner sample. Psychological adjustment was assessed using our own questionnaire, sojourners were tested to estimate well-being, and published norms were used to evaluate grief relative to persons experiencing a loss. To our knowledge, these scales have not been used in previous research with sojourners.

Feelings About Returning Home: A 16-item questionnaire was used to measure difficulties when returning back to New Zealand. Based on results of interviews of returning sojourners by Wilson (1993), the true-false questionnaire asked about preparedness to return and how respondents felt about their adjustment upon return to New Zealand (details in Soeterik, 1998). The questions used are quoted from the questionnaire below.

Profile of Mood States-Short Form (POMS-SF): Psychological well-being was measured using the 37-item short form of the POMS (Shacham, 1983). The measure comprises six subscales: tension, depression, anger, fatigue, confusion, and vigour; all but the last being negative mood states. The first five were used in this study. Scoring procedures recommended by the author (Shacham, 1983) were used. The POMS has previously been used on AFS students while in the host culture and found to be valid and reliable (Ward and Searle, 1991).

Grief Experience Inventory (GEI): The 135-item loss version of the GEI (Sanders et al., 1985; Sanders, 1989) assesses experiences, feelings, and symptoms during the grieving process. It contains nine bereavement scales (despair, anger/hostility, guilt, social isolation, loss of control, rumination, depersonalisation, somatization, death anxiety); it also has in it three validity scales measuring a specific response set (denial, atypical responses, social desirability). We compared our sojourner group with all four groups of those assumed to be suffering grief after a loss, for which norms were published for the scale, a Distant group of 135 who had lost a close relative by death but more then a year prior to testing; a 102 participant Recent bereavement group who had lost someone within 3 months of testing; 8 Parents bereaved by the death of their child; 127 who experience a Non-Death loss by divorce, institutionalisation of a loved one, or loss associated with having a child with an intellectual disability (Sanders, Mauger, and Strong, 1985). We also compared our sojourner group with a group of those assumed to be suffering no grief for which norms were published for the scale, namely 105 who have suffered no loss over 5 years called No-Loss. We chose the GEI as it had proved useful in other studies assessing non-death loss (e.g., Robak and Weitzman, 1995).

Of the 135 items, 41 were adapted, most (36) by a simple substitution of the word "loss" with "host country", "returning home", or "New Zealand". The remainder were adapted to retain the essence of the questions, while changing the focus of the question from that of a death experience to one of loss of another country's culture. Scoring procedures recommended by the authors (Saunders et al., 1985) were followed. Details for specific questions can be found elsewhere (Soeterik, 1998).

RESULTS

Feelings About Returning Home: Of the 205 sojourners, most (93%) said they had "changed

a lot inside and had learned to appreciate what New Zealand was really like" (99%). More than two-thirds (69%) of the AFS exchange students described it "as having been easier to leave than to return to New Zealand," most (84%) saying "that a part of themselves wanted to stay in the host country while another part wanted to return to New Zealand." Many (61%) reported "it not being easy to return to New Zealand and … had found it frustrating" (66%), they "did not fit it" (53%), and "had difficulty relating to friends" (48%) and family (23%), despite three quarters of the participants (75%) describing having "prepared themselves to return to New Zealand."

Psychological Well-Being: We compared on the 5 subscales of the POMS, the 39% who agreed with the statement that "coming home had been easy" or "very easy" with the 61% of students disagreeing that return had been (very) easy. Hereafter we call these two the *Easy* and *Hard* return subgroups. When comparing the two subgroups of returning sojourners on the measures in the POMS, we found those for whom return was Easy to have better levels of psychological well-being than those who said it was Hard, $F(1,200) = 5.07$, $p = .02$ (see Fig. 1). In the figure, the group who did not go abroad are

presented for comparison purposes, although they are not a directly comparable group nor are they an appropriate control group. The scores of this group may be of some interest in that no norms from high-school students or students of that age are available.

Grief Experience: When we then compared our two subgroups of sojourners on nine GEI measures of grief using MANOVA, we found that the Hard Return subgroup showed greater levels of grief as a main effect and as an interaction ($F(1,205) = 31.8$ and $F(8,1640) = 6.59$ respectively, $p < 0.000001$ for both). Inspection of the means (Table 1) clearly shows that there is little difference between factors of Somatization and Loss of Control for the two subgroups while the Hard Return group has significantly higher grief scores on all if the other seven factors than the Easy Return group.

To see if those who "prepared [themselves] to come back to New Zealand and go on with life" differed from those who had made no such preparation, we performed a MANOVA with the two response values of the difficulty question forming two subgroups—easy and hard as described above. We also used in the analysis two subgroups separated by their responses to
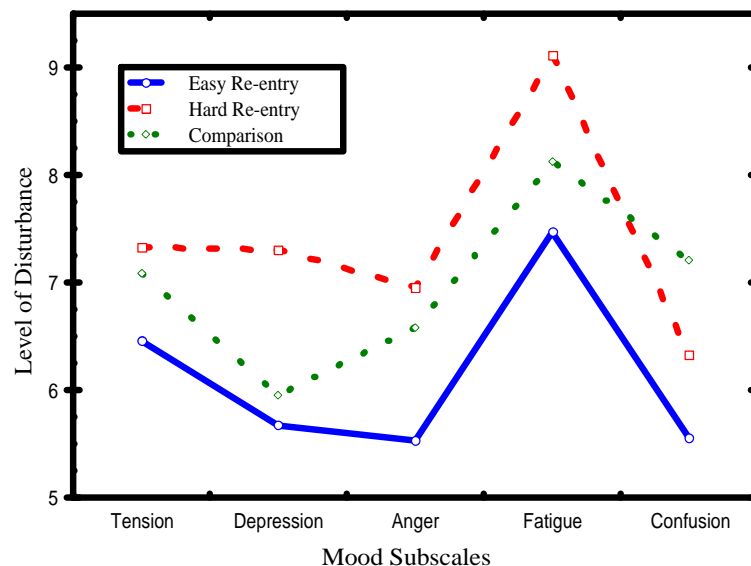

Fig. 1. Mean scores on the five sub-scales of the POMS for high school sojourners who found return to be Easy, and those who found it Hard, plus a comparison group of high school students experiencing no loss.

the preparation question. There was resulting significant interaction of preparation with difficulty, $F(1, 99) = 4.76$, $p = 0.03$. As can be seen in Table 1, there is little difference in total grief scores when return is easy, although the unprepared subgroup (n = 24) showed significantly more rumination and derealisation than those who were prepared (n=53). However, when return was not easy, those who were prepared (n = 56) showed more grief than the prepared easy subgroup, showing significantly more grief on five of the scales of grief than those who were prepared. Highest grief was seen in those both finding it difficult and not preparing for their return (n = 70); they showed significantly more grief on five subscales than those who were prepared. There was a high and significant correlation between level of preparedness and level of finding return easy (or not agreeing that return was easy) of +0.45 (p< 0.001).

To test our hypothesis that those experiencing difficulty on return were grieving, we used published norms of those experiencing loss of some kind. Support for the hypothesis would be to find that (a) the Hard Return subgroup of sojourners were significantly different from those suffering no loss, and (b) the same subgroup did not differ in their grief scores from those suffering a loss of some kind. We set our alpha for the first prediction at 0.05, in order to evaluate the absence of any difference. To make it difficult to support our second prediction, we set the second alpha at 0.10—to find any difference easy to detect if it were there. In this latter case we wish to make it

extraordinarily easy to reject the null hypothesis, tolerating a Type I error in one case in every 2.5 but making it much less likely to make a Type II error; making it more likely to reject the null hypothesis (whether true or false).

The results of those two-tailed t-tests are illustrated in Table 1. As predicted, the Hard Return subgroup is significantly different from non-loss controls on all 5 of the subscales where norms are available. As predicted, the Hard Return subgroup is not different from at least one of the 4 loss groups in 8 out of the 9 grief subscales.

DISCUSSION

"After all of our exploration we will return to the place we started and know it for the first time." - T.S. Elliot

As predicted by previous research, the present study demonstrated that over half the returnees found it challenging coming back to New Zealand after a year living in another country. This finding suggests that returning home may actually be more difficult then the overseas experience. Those for whom return was difficult experienced considerable psychological distress, confirming the results of Rogers and Ward (1993) on returning AFS students to New Zealand and others (Sussman, 2002), and our results demonstrated levels of grief symptoms not dissimilar to those experiencing grief through bereavement. It must be stressed that norms for grief symptoms were not available for the age

Table 1: Mean grief scores on 12 subscales of GEI on all 4 available groups for which norms are available compared with our two subgroups where returning was "easy" or "hard" and our no-loss control group

Scale	Data From the Present Study			No-Death	Early	Late	Parents
	No-loss Control	Sojourners					
		Easy	Hard				
Somatisation	3.59++	4.18+	4.68	5.32+	6.34+	8.79+	5.65+
Despair	NA	3.68++	5.71	5.62	7.96+	7.18+	7.37+
Depersonalisation	NA	3.50++	4.32	N P	4.72+	4.42	4.80+
Death Anxiety	3.85++	4.39++	5.11	4.96	5	5.67+	5.79+
Anger / Hostility	2.01++	2.48++	3.65	3.19	3.84	4.86+	4.66+
Guilt	NA	1.18++	2.39	N P	1.45	1.85	2.07
Loss of Control	2.51++	4.84	4.88	3.32	5.11	4.54	5.48+
Rumination	NA	3.68++	6.54	N P	4.84	5.1	5.24
Social Isolation	1.37++	1.41++	2.99	2.51	2.4	2.67	2.53
MEAN Prepared		3.30++	3.94				
MEAN Unprepared		3.39++	4.94				
Atypical Response	3.90++	6.60++	7.61	5.15	5.09	8.85+	6.6
Denial	NA	3.45++	2.70	2.83	3.66+	3.13+	2.45
Social Desirability	3.72	3.46	3.35	3.76+	4.66+	3.94+	4.38+

group we used, although a comparison was made with similarly-aged students albeit from a different sample.

This similarity between returning sojourners and bereaved groups in the measures we have used, suggests that the use of the concept of grief in examining the process of cross cultural re-entry may be informative. Surprisingly, it seems possible that the loss of a cultural experience concomitant with the sojourning experience and all that entails, can, in some ways, be thought of as comparable to persons who have lost a close relative by death, parents bereaved by the death of their child, or persons who have experience a non-death loss by divorce, institutionalisation of a loved one, or loss associated with having a child with an intellectual disability.

While our findings support the suggestion that those sojourners who find return difficult were experiencing a loss situation similar to that of those recently bereaved, other interpretations are possible. Two things have changed: the traveller has left their host country; and the traveller has returned to their home country presumably a changed person and so is reacting in a different way to their home situation. Either of these could be the cause of the results we report in this study.

In our study we used a group which would be expected to show greater effects of return than many other groups studied before. Because the participants of the present study were both aged in their teens and also unmarried, we expected from previous research a problematic repatriation adjustment (Cox, 2004), especially in those where return was more difficult than anticipated (Rogers and Ward, 1993; Sussman, 2002).

No previous research has used grief symptoms or measures to look at responses of sojourners either to or from the host country. It would be interesting to determine if a grief response as hypothesized might also be found for those travelling from their homes to live abroad.

With business increasingly valuing experience overseas (e.g., Inkson et al., 1997), more people will be travelling overseas for extended periods. Those 50,000 returning sojourners who would report difficulties may benefit some care being provided by their exchange programs following return to the home country. At the least, these programs could

investigate as to how they might prepare the returnees for a loss experience and the symptoms accompanying such a loss. Nevertheless our results suggest that even a degree of self-preparedness will not completely ameliorate the symptoms of grief associated with return.

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NOTES

1. Ethical approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, Feilding Agricultural High School, and New Zealand American Field Service.

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