

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Homesick or *Sick-of-Home*?

Examining the Effects of Self-Disclosure on Students' Reverse Culture Shock after Studying Abroad: A Mixed-Method Study

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Abstract

This mixed-method study investigates the effects of self-disclosure and reverse culture shock among students returning from studying abroad. While previous literature examined the socio-cultural factors of reentry, this study explores the role of communication in this readaptation process using a sample of 285 international college students returning home from different countries. Quantitative data showed that some of the dimensions of self-disclosure were significant predictors of the dimensions of reverse culture shock and difficulty during four phases of the reentry. Qualitative findings revealed reasons for self-disclosure, as well as cultural and interpersonal challenges of sharing one's experience when returning home. Implications and future directions are discussed to facilitate students' reentry through communicative practices like self-disclosure.

Keywords: reverse culture shock, reentry, self-disclosure, study abroad, mixed-method.

Introduction

International experience has become one of the most vital components of higher education in the 21st century. The number of students studying abroad continues to rise, at a rate of about 10% annually. While there were almost 5 million students who studied abroad in 2014, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has projected this number to reach 8 million by 2025 (Kinloch, 2020). Described as a short or long-term academic experience during which students live in a foreign country, study abroad is one of the most transforming experiences in the life of a college student (McKeown, 2009). Regardless of the destination, students are likely to experience feelings of disorientation due to the unfamiliarity of a new cultural situation (i.e., *culture shock*). While culture shock is associated with the initial adaptation to a new culture, *reverse culture shock* (also known as *reentry shock*) refers to the shock of coming back into one's native culture after returning home from an extended time abroad (Gaw, 2000).

While sojourners' adjustment to a foreign country have been extensively studied over the last few decades (Ward et al., 1998), empirical evidence shows that the feelings of tension during reentry are more severe than those experienced during the initial culture shock (Adler, 1981). During reentry, sojourners need to integrate the experience overseas with the life back home, while resolving internal and external disconnects between host and home country (Tomlin et al., 2014). In this transitional phase, communication functions as a driving force of cultural readjustment (Pitts, 2009), as well as an effective coping strategy to bridge identity gaps (Chen, 1993). While sojourners experience socio-cultural, linguistic, political, professional, and educational difficulties upon their return (Marsh, 1975), the greatest challenge is reshaping interpersonal relationships (Martin, 1986). While most returnees display a high willingness to self-disclose to reestablish intimacy with family, friends, and romantic partners, others prefer to deal with reverse culture shock by themselves (Davis & Chapman, 2007).

Existing research examines the challenges of reverse culture shock in different contexts, including the repatriation of corporate employees (Adler, 1981), military veterans, Peace Corps representatives, and religious missionaries (Kimber, 2012). Despite the theoretical and practical significance of understanding the role of communication in coping with reverse culture shock (Koester, 2009), there is a lack of scholarship providing both quantitative and qualitative evidence from empirical studies (Koyanagi, 2018). To help fill this gap, this study uses a mixed-method design to examine how college students who recently studied abroad use self-disclosure to manage reverse culture shock and redefine their social relationships. This study also examines the nature of interpersonal communication to understand the struggles that students face and the reasons behind their self-disclosure.

Literature Review

Reverse Culture Shock

In his book *The Art of Coming Home*, Storti (2003) explains that “the strangeness of home is bound to be more alarming than the strangeness overseas” (p. 16). Defined as a second, more severe round of culture shock into one’s home country, *reverse culture shock* is a state of cultural paralysis characterized by “physical, psychological, linguistic, and socio-cultural difficulties experienced after an extended stay in a foreign country” (Young, 2014, p. 59). Contrary to conventional wisdom, reverse culture shock can be more severe than the initial culture shock because most returners do not anticipate it (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015), have unrealistic expectations (Chang, 2009), have changed during their experience (Sussman, 2002), and lack anticipatory coping skills to readjust (Arthur, 2003). In a study of exchange students, Storti (2003) found that 64% of American returnees reported significant reverse culture shock upon repatriation, and that more than 50% of Swedish exchange students said that “they didn’t fit in” at home.

Previous studies have identified several factors affecting how students experience reverse culture shock, including personality, preparedness, perceived similarity between home and host country, cultural intelligence, and length of the sojourn (Presbitero, 2016). While some returners feel alienated for months, others readapt within a few weeks. As Christofi and Thompson (2007) note, people with previous experience abroad feel more prepared than those who do not, and those who are abroad for less than six months have a smoother readaptation than those who stayed longer. While returners experience reverse culture shock differently, Fray (1988) identifies four consistent dimensions of this phenomenon: cultural distance, interpersonal distance, moral distance, and emotional distance.

Cultural Distance

Fray (1988) defines *cultural distance* as the inability to fit into one's home culture and understand familiar (yet unspoken) socio-cultural customs. Cultural distance can be linguistic, professional, academic, or environmental. Returners feel linguistically distant because they have forgotten how to speak their own language and unconsciously switch between the home and host languages. Professionally, coworkers and supervisors often fail to appreciate employees' newly gained cross-cultural competence (Adler, 1981), while educationally, students feel distant toward their home culture's university system. In addition, Pitts (2016) notes that cultural distance can emerge when the study abroad location is geographically and climatically different from the home country.

Interpersonal Distance

While cultural distance refers to returners' connectedness to the cultural environment, *interpersonal distance* deals with perceived closeness with people in the home country. On one hand, these home connections fulfill students' need for affection and belonging (Pitts, 2009); on the other hand, they may increase stress because students feel judged, lonely, or misunderstood (Chang, 2009). While returners can experience interpersonal distance with anyone in the home culture, they feel most

disconnected from family, friends, and romantic partners because they expect them to show interest in their stories (Martin, 1984). While previous research suggests that the relationship with parents and siblings is more likely to improve (Martin, 1986), friendships and romantic relationships are more likely to deteriorate (Tohyama, 2008). Due to a lack of time or skills, significant others often fail to provide the social support that returners are looking for.

Moral Distance

The third dimension that Fray (1988) identifies is *moral distance*, which refers to one's likelihood to accept or reject the home culture's moral values. While abroad, students are exposed to standards, norms, and behaviors that might be taboo in the home culture. When coming home, some returners may challenge their home culture's norms (e.g., dress code, use of alcohol and recreational drugs, and sexual behaviors) or reject previous beliefs. Overall, moral distance refers to experiencing discomfort toward culturally dominant values that might have been reevaluated while abroad.

Emotional Distance

Originally called "grief" by Fray (1988), *emotional distance* refers to the overall feelings of loss, homesickness, and separation from the host culture. Knowing that the experience will inevitably end, students mourn the end of their experience by remaining connected to people abroad through online platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), which often leads to nostalgia and discontent for their home culture (Butcher, 2002). If unaddressed, emotional distance can negatively influence students' mental health (Gaw, 2000). Previous studies have confirmed the relationship between cross-cultural transitions and psychological health, especially during long-term experiences (Ryan & Twibell, 2000), suggesting that depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and trauma are among the main threats to returners' psychological health (Pritchard, 2011). In addition, study abroad students are more likely to cope with negative feelings of reentry through self-harm, alcohol, or substance abuse than non-study abroad students (Pedersen et al., 2014; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

The W-Curve Hypothesis

While reverse culture shock does not last forever, it often progresses temporally, following a linear development that Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) call the W-Curve (see Figure 1), which extends Lysgaard's (1955) U-Curve hypothesis. The second U of the W-Curve progresses in four stages: the *pre-departure* (or *leave-taking*) stage, the *honeymoon* (at home) stage, the *reverse culture shock* (or *reentry shock*) stage, and the *readjustment* (or *reintegration*) stage. The pre-departure stage consists of disengaging from the host culture while still being abroad, and it is often characterized by pre-departure gatherings and goodbye parties. During the honeymoon stage, students experience a positive euphoria, a sense of relief to be back home, and a desire to experience all the things they missed during their study abroad. The third stage, reverse culture shock, is often the most challenging one, and can be described as lonely and frustrating because returners miss their study abroad location and friends, lose their status of foreign "superstars," and feel more alienated. Finally, the readjustment is characterized by gradual resocialization into one's native country, as returners learn to integrate aspects of their host and home cultures, as well as their new intercultural identity (Kim, 2001).

Reentry Communication and Self-Disclosure

While most research focuses on the cultural aspects of reentry (Szkudlarek, 2010), less is known about its interpersonal dimension. Students reenter not only the home culture but also a complex web of social relationships with family, friends, and significant others (Martin, 1986). They use communication to make sense of their experience, renegotiate their relationship with loved ones, and facilitate their readjustment. However, communication may function in a counterproductive manner. For example, Martin (1986) suggests that students are more likely to experience negative feelings within their interpersonal network if they perceive conversations as more superficial than when they left. While reentry communication may seem challenging, it also opens opportunities to alleviate negative feelings, reflect on identity change, and grieve the loss of the host country. As such,

it is crucial to understand the role of reentry communication during the readaptation process, to maximize positive effects while avoiding negative ones that may worsen reverse culture shock.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure has been widely studied in the field of communication, psychology, and education. While different lines of research have explored many aspects of self-disclosure, there are a few broad elements that can be used to describe this behavior (Omarzu, 2000). Wheelless (1978) describes self-disclosure as a multidimensional process based on the willingness of an individual to reveal private information that would be unavailable otherwise during interactions, and identifies five primary dimensions of self-disclosure: *intent* (the reason to disclose), *amount* (the quantity of disclosure), *depth* (the quality of disclosure), *valence* (the positivity aspect of the disclosure), and *honesty* (the truthfulness and accuracy of the disclosure). Since intimate information is less readily available than non-intimate information, personal disclosures have a high relational reward (Petty & Mirels, 1981), fostering mutual trust, intimacy, and reciprocity between interactants (Omarzu, 2000). Self-disclosure allows disclosers to shape how others see them, as they use communication to “tell others how to understand their experience or how to empathize with them” (Tam et al., 2006, p. 416).

Applied to the context of reentry, self-disclosure can serve important functions to manage the effects of reverse culture shock and reestablish relationships. According to Storti (2003), self-disclosure can help to alleviate negative emotions, improve interpersonal interactions, and increase self-esteem, and can be enacted with people in the home country, in the host country, or via mediated channels. Personal disclosures with people in the home country can be challenging because returners often feel misunderstood and unable to express all the personal changes they go through (Martin, 1986). Even though returners might experience interpersonal challenges within their close network, Cox (2004) suggests that maintaining supportive relationships with people in the home country has the potential to make reentry easier.

Concerning disclosure with people in the host country, current literature remains unclear (Szkudlarek, 2010), indicating that self-disclosure may not necessarily make things better. Rohrllich and Martin (1991) suggest that students who discuss important issues with host country nationals have a harder time readjusting, possibly because they still feel emotionally connected with their host country. Van Gorp et al. (2017) confirmed these results, suggesting that returners without supportive host country relationships are better psychologically adjusted upon reentry.

Finally, self-disclosure enacted through mediated channels can help to fill the voids and interpersonal gaps that returners experience with their home and host country's interpersonal networks. Previous studies have suggested that media use plays a crucial role during cross-cultural adaptation (Chen & Hanasono, 2016; Park et al., 2014) to increase language fluency, maintain long distance relationships, and facilitate interpersonal interactions with locals (Kim, 2001). According to Cox (2004), the quality or emotionality of communication is not restricted by various media technological limitations, as returning students who frequently use newer technologies (e.g., email and the Internet) to stay in contact with their home country report higher satisfaction than those who do not.

Despite numerous benefits associated with self-disclosure, not much is known concerning the role that self-disclosure plays during the readaptation process, as the literature suggests both positive and negative effects of interpersonal self-disclosure during reentry. This study examines the relationship between self-disclosure and reverse culture shock using a mixed-method research design. The following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between self-disclosure and the level of reverse culture shock as displayed by college students who recently returned home from studying abroad?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between self-disclosure and the level of difficulty students experienced in the four phases of the W-Curve when they returned home from studying abroad?

RQ3: What was the most difficult aspect of returning home after studying abroad?

RQ4: What was the most difficult aspect of talking about returning home after studying abroad?

RQ5: (a) To whom and (b) why were students more likely to disclose their study abroad experience after returning home?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants had to meet the following criteria to be eligible to participate in this study: (a) being a college student who (b) participated in a study abroad program (c) within the last five years (d) for a minimum of five weeks and who (e) returned to the same academic institution prior to the experience abroad. After receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board, a preliminary online survey was piloted with 37 returning students to ensure the validity, reliability, and clarity of the questions. For the formal study, a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants at a mid-size midwestern university, through personal and professional connections of the first author. Participants were given a URL to a Qualtrics online survey with both close-ended and open-ended questions. No compensation was provided for their participation. Following the consent procedures, the survey included measures of their study abroad experience, reverse culture shock, self-disclosure behaviors, and four open-ended questions. The survey took approximately 25 minutes to complete. Data were collected online over the course of three months.

The final sample consisted of 285 participants who met all the inclusion criteria and completed the full survey. A retrospective power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to assess whether our study had enough statistical power to detect medium effects ($f^2 = 0.15$) for linear regressions with four to five predictors and a confidence level set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Retrospective power was found adequate to detect medium effects using the sample of 285 participants. The average age was

23.6 ($SD = 4.6$), ranging from 19 to 45. Participants were from a variety of countries,¹ mostly from the United States (25.3%), Italy (7.8%), Spain (6.6%), and the United Kingdom (6.6%). Information of participants' demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Measures

All scales used in this study were adapted from previous research and are available upon request. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to evaluate the content and construct validity of all measures. Since reverse culture shock and self-disclosure are constructs with multiple subconstructs, each of them was tested for second-order unidimensionality. Results showed that the four-factor model solution for reverse culture shock was acceptable: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .96, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .94, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .07, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .04, $\chi^2(129) = 73.88, p < .001$, with factor loadings ranging from 0.85 to 0.61. Results also showed that the five-factor model solution for self-disclosure was acceptable: CFI = .95, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .05, $\chi^2(91) = 59.03, p < .001$, with factor loadings ranging from 0.86 to 0.64.

Reverse Culture Shock

To measure reverse culture shock, a modified version of Fray's (1988) Homecomer Culture Shock Scale was used with 5-point Likert scales (i.e., strongly agree-5 to strongly disagree-1). Existing evidence has shown the scale to be valid and reliable (Tohyama, 2008). Since Fray's (1988) original scale measured the reentry of missionary children, items were modified to suit the study abroad context, and reported an overall reliability score of $\alpha = .87$, with a mean of 3.39 and a standard deviation of 0.70. Four dimensions were measured: *Cultural Distance* (7 items; $\alpha = .76; M = 3.47; SD$

¹ Students' home country (i.e., the country where the student claimed his or her citizenship) included the United States, Italy, Australia, Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Germany. Similarly, participants' host country (i.e., the foreign location of the study abroad sojourn) included the United States, Italy, Australia, Dominican Republic, Germany, Norway, India, Romania, Spain, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Sweden, Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, Poland, Costa Rica, China, and Russia.

= 0.78; “*I was overly critical about the lifestyle in my home country*”), *Interpersonal Distance* (5 items; $\alpha = .68$; $M = 3.40$; $SD = 0.80$; “*Feelings of not ‘fitting in’ were common to me*”), *Moral Distance* (1 item; $M = 2.59$; $SD = 1.26$; “*I was uneasy with the drug and alcohol morals of people around me*”),² and *Emotional Distance* (4 items; $\alpha = .65$; $M = 3.51$; $SD = 0.91$; “*Homesickness for my study abroad location was a common feeling for me*”). A higher score indicated stronger reverse culture shock.

Self-Disclosure

Using a modified version of Wheelless’ (1978) General Disclosiveness Scale,³ self-disclosure was measured with 5-point Likert scales (i.e., strongly agree-5 to strongly disagree-1) on five primary dimensions: *Intent* (2 items; $\alpha = .62$; $M = 3.71$; $SD = 0.79$; “*I often wanted to talk about myself*”), *Amount* (3 items; $\alpha = .74$; $M = 3.54$; $SD = 0.94$; “*I wanted to talk about myself for fairly long periods of time*”), *Depth* (3 items; $\alpha = .68$; $M = 3.30$; $SD = 0.91$; “*I disclosed deep aspects of my experience without hesitation*”), *Valence* (1 item; $M = 4.20$; $SD = 0.91$; “*I usually disclosed positive things about my experience abroad*”), and *Honesty* (3 items; $\alpha = .62$; $M = 3.55$; $SD = 0.81$; “*I was always honest in my self-disclosure*”). The modified scale reported an overall reliability score of $\alpha = .76$, with a mean of 3.61 and a standard deviation of 0.51. A higher score indicated stronger self-disclosure.

Difficulty Readjusting: W-Curve Phases

Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) W-Curve was adapted to assess participants’ level of difficulty during the four stages of reverse culture shock, which were rated on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (no difficult) to 7 (difficult): *Pre-Departure* ($M = 5.06$; $SD = 1.80$; “*Right before my departure*”), *Honeymoon* ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 1.80$; “*As soon as I arrived home*”), *Reverse Culture*

² One item was dropped from Moral Distance due to the low factor loading and a lack of content validity.

³ One item was dropped from Intent and two items were dropped for Valence due to the low factor loadings and a lack of content validity.

Shock ($M = 4.86$; $SD = 1.69$; “*Sometime after I arrived at home*”), and *Readjustment* ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 1.87$; “*Long after I arrived at home*”). The four items reported an overall reliability score of $\alpha = .51$.

Open-Ended Questions and Demographics

To further understand participants’ self-disclosure decisions (RQ3-RQ5) and triangulate the quantitative data (Reinard, 2008), participants were asked four open-ended questions about their reentry experience: (1) *What was the most difficult aspect of returning home after studying abroad?* (2) *What was the most difficult aspect of talking about your experience abroad?* (3) *To whom did you feel most comfortable talking about your experience abroad and why?* (4) *Is there anything else about your experience abroad that I didn’t ask that you would like me to know?*

Finally, participants were asked to provide general demographic information about their gender, age, education, home and host country, number of times abroad, duration of the study abroad, and family experience abroad.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

This mixed-method study used both quantitative and qualitative data to triangulate and complement findings (Reinard, 2008). The quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS v.27 to answer RQ1 and RQ2, using descriptive and inferential statistics to assess the relationships between variables. Hierarchical linear regressions were employed to examine the relationship between self-disclosure and reverse culture shock (RQ1) and difficulty during the W-Curve (RQ2), after establishing that none of the assumptions were violated (i.e., linear relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable, homoskedastic residuals that were independent and normally distributed, no multicollinearity between predictors, and no significant outliers). Listwise deletion was used to remove a case if it was missing values for one of the variables in the analysis (i.e., only participants who provided a complete

response for all the variables were included in the analysis). Compared to pairwise deletion, listwise deletion is considered a more conservative approach in handling missing data (Newman, 2009).

Qualitative Data

The open-ended responses were exported from Qualtrics and converted into a Word document. The corpus of data resulted in 39 pages of text (total of 843 individual narrative). To answer RQ3-RQ5, the qualitative data were analyzed via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by two of the authors, using open and a priori coding. After reading the transcripts thoroughly, the first round of line-by-line open coding was conducted to identify sensitizing concepts and preliminary themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For each bit of information, a tentative label (i.e., code) was assigned to segments of the narrative to capture participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Drawing from literature on cross-cultural readjustment, the preliminary codes were used to generate the initial codebook. Then a small portion of the data (i.e., four out of the 12 pages of narratives for each open-ended response) was coded to train the coders and refine the codebook. For each emerging theme, coders wrote a brief description to capture the finding. When a narrative could not be coded with any existing themes, coders discussed until reaching an agreement. Irrelevant or inaccurate codes were deleted. A final codebook was developed at the end of this process (see Appendix).

The second round of analysis was conducted using a priori coding, whereby a coding scheme is created before analyzing a dataset to guide analysis (Blair, 2015). Following the modified codebook, all narratives were coded a priori to answer each research question. Coders coded the rest of the narratives independently by reading each narrative and assigning a code representing one of the themes. They rejoined after completion to resolve all the discrepancies, achieving an inter-coder reliability of 1. This process resulted in a list of *exemplars* (i.e., important quotes from participants'

narratives) that served as evidence to answer each RQ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Finally, a summary statement of the findings for each RQ was produced. The same steps were repeated for all the RQs.

Results

Quantitative Results

RQ1: Is there a relationship between self-disclosure and the level of reverse culture shock as displayed by college students who recently returned home from studying abroad?

To answer RQ1, a hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine the extent to which self-disclosure was associated with the dimensions of reverse culture shock (outcome variables), controlling for demographic characteristics.⁴ As such, gender (Male = 1, Female = 2), age, level of education, number of times of study abroad, and duration of study abroad were entered in block 1; the five dimensions of self-disclosure (intent, amount, valence, depth, and honesty) were entered in block 2. The results are reported in Table 2.⁵

Cultural Distance. The overall model predicting cultural distance was significant ($F(10, 254) = 3.22, p = .001$), with a total $R^2 = .11$, a global model effect size of $f^2 = .12$, and a change in $R^2 = .05$ that was significant ($p = .03$). Gender was shown as a significant predictor in both blocks ($\beta = .16, t = 2.65$; and $\beta = .15, t = 2.45$, respectively), indicating that female students were more likely to experience a stronger cultural distance compared to males. Honesty was significant in the second block ($\beta = -.22, t = -3.33$), suggesting that when students felt they could be more honest they often felt less distant from the cultural norms and values of their home country.

⁴ In addition to participants' demographic characteristics, we also controlled for similarity of (a) languages spoken in the home and host country, and (b) home and host continents in the models predicting the four dimensions of reverse culture shock (RQ1) and the difficulty during the W-Curve (RQ2). Our findings suggest that neither (a) home and host language nor (b) home and host continent were significant predictors of our dependent variables, therefore they were not included in the regression models. These findings seem to support the highly subjective nature of reverse culture shock previously established in the cross-cultural literature (Eguchi & Baig, 2018), suggesting that participants' reverse culture shock does not depend as much on geographical location or similarity of languages spoken in the home and host country (Chaban et al., 2011), rather on other demographic and individual variables (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015).

⁵ Due to the lack of significant predictors, the results for moral distance are not discussed.

Interpersonal Distance. The overall model predicting interpersonal distance was significant ($F(10, 255) = 4.30, p = .000$), with a total $R^2 = .14$, a global model effect size of $f^2 = .16$, and a change in $R^2 = .06$ that was significant ($p = .01$). Gender ($\beta = .20, t = 3.40$) and duration ($\beta = .17, t = 2.62$) were shown as significant predictors in the second block, indicating that female students (compared to males), as well as those who studied abroad for a longer time, were more likely to experience a stronger interpersonal distance. In addition, depth was significant ($\beta = .16, t = 2.15$), indicating that students who were deeper in their disclosures experienced more interpersonal distance. Honesty was also a significant predictor ($\beta = -.25, t = 3.81$), indicating that students who were more honest in their disclosure, the less interpersonal distance they experienced.

Emotional Distance. The overall model predicting emotional distance was significant ($F(10, 258) = 2.98, p = .001$), with a total $R^2 = .10$, a global model effect size of $f^2 = .11$, and a change in $R^2 = .07$ that was significant ($p = .00$). Gender was a strong predictor of emotional distance in both blocks ($\beta = .15, t = 2.40$; and $\beta = .15, t = 2.39$, respectively), suggesting female students experienced a stronger emotional distance compared to male students. In the second block, honesty was again significant ($\beta = -.17, t = 2.65$), indicating that students who were more honest felt less emotional distance.

RQ2: Is there a relationship between self-disclosure and the level of difficulty students experienced in the four phases of the W-Curve when they returned home from studying abroad?

To answer RQ2, a hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine the association between self-disclosure and difficulty experienced during the four phases of reentry (pre-departure, honeymoon, reverse culture shock, and readjustment), controlling for demographic characteristics (entered in block 1). The five dimensions of self-disclosure were

entered in block 2. The difficulty experienced in the four phases of the reentry were treated as outcome variables. The results are reported in Table 3.

Pre-Departure and Honeymoon Phases. The models predicting the difficulty experienced during the pre-departure and honeymoon phases were not significant. The only significant predictor in the honeymoon phase was education ($\beta = -.18, t = 2.42$), indicating that more highly educated students experienced less difficulty in this phase.

Reverse Culture Shock Phase. The overall model predicting the difficulty experienced during the reverse culture shock phase was significant ($F(10, 253) = 2.55, p = .006$), with a total $R^2 = .09$, a global model effect size of $f^2 = .1$, and a change in $R^2 = .06$, that was significant ($p = .01$). Gender was again a significant predictor in both blocks, ($\beta = .15, t = 2.38$; and $\beta = .15, t = 2.48$, respectively). In the second block, when adding the disclosure dimensions, results showed that there was a negative significant relationship between the intent of self-disclosure and the difficulty during the reverse culture shock phase ($\beta = -.14, t = -2.15$), indicating that the students who were more intentional to disclose experienced lower difficulty in this phase. Honesty was also significant ($\beta = -.16, t = -2.37$), indicating that when students who felt they could be honest in their disclosures experienced less difficulty during the reverse culture shock phase (which is considered the most challenging phase of the readaptation process).

Readjustment Phase. The overall model predicting the difficulty experienced during the readjustment phase was significant ($F(10, 240) = 4.17, p = .000$), with a total $R^2 = .15$, and a global model effect size of $f^2 = .18$. The change in $R^2 = .03$ was not significant ($p = .20$). Age, gender, and duration of study abroad were significant predictors, indicating that older students, female students, and those who studied abroad for a longer period were more likely to experience a higher level of difficulty in the readjustment phase compared to younger, male students, and those who studied abroad for a relatively shorter time. Honesty was significant and of a similar magnitude as in the reverse

culture shock phase ($\beta = -.16, t = -2.34$), indicating that students' who felt they could be honest experienced less difficulty during the readjustment phase. Notably, none of the five dimensions of self-disclosure were significant in the first two phases of the W-Curve (pre-departure and honeymoon), which could be due to the fact that students have not yet experienced the negative effects of reverse culture shock. As Storti (2003) suggests, students do not actually start making sense of their experience until the positive feelings of the honeymoon phase have worn off; therefore, it may take students some time to honestly disclose how they have changed.

Qualitative Findings

RQ3: What was the most difficult aspect of returning home after studying abroad?

To answer RQ3, a thematic analysis was conducted that yielded a total of 11 themes that reflected students' most difficult aspects of returning home after studying abroad.

Language. Upon reentry, language difficulties were common among returning students. Participants often forgot specific words in their native language or failed to understand local slangs. As one student mentioned, "The language was a shock. My Italian dictionary got halved because my brain was stuck in English." In other cases, difficulties were due to a temporary confusion between the home and host languages. Finally, some students resisted speaking their native language upon return because they wanted to remain connected to the language of the host country. Overall, language difficulties were temporary and returning students gradually readjusted to speaking their mother tongue.

Educational System. Another prominent roadblock returning students encountered was related to the educational systems. Since it is common for different countries to adopt different educational systems and philosophies, it is not surprising that some students felt "readjusting to the school system was tragic." As one returning student explained, "College abroad was a lot of independent learning, outside of the classroom. It was difficult coming back to the U.S." In addition, students were more likely to criticize teaching methods of their home country while praising those of the host country.

Bureaucracy. Similar to the educational system, returners often talked about their difficulty in navigating bureaucratic practices in the home country, such as filling out paperwork and handling visa requirements. While these may seem like small bureaucratic hurdles, they posed concerns for returning students, especially if they did not have the adequate knowledge, resources, and skills to manage them. Explaining her frustration, one participant mentioned that the biggest challenge was that “paperwork took a long time” to be processed and translated between the home and host language.

Interpersonal Relationships. As previous research has suggested (Martin, 1986), one of the biggest challenges from returning home from abroad is found in the interpersonal sphere (i.e., friends, family, and romantic relationships). This interpersonal distance (Fray, 1988) is described as difficulty socializing, understanding people’s mentality, and engaging in daily conversations. As one student described, “There was a gap between me and my friends and colleagues, a one-year gap in which I’ve missed everything that was going on there,” or the feeling that “something has been lost between you and them.” In addition, participants talked about their difficulty readjusting to the *people*. The code “the people” appeared in participants’ narratives as a broad term to describe their struggles with acquaintances and small talk. Feeling misunderstood was common among participants: “People did not understand my experience and I could not relate to them in the same way.”

Social Norms. If managing interpersonal interactions was a big challenge, participants reported similar struggles understanding unspoken social norms in their home culture, including local customs, appropriate behaviors, rules, ways of thinking, and social taboos. For example, comparing social norms in the United States and in France, one student mentioned that readjusting to social norms was very difficult: “I lived in France and going to stores, restaurants, places in public, I didn’t remember to ‘engage’ in social niceties with clerks, patrons, etc.” In this case, social norms also referred to people’s identifiable “ways of thinking (taboos and stereotypes mainly) of the hometown society.”

Transportation System. Another difficulty was related to the difference in the transportation systems between the home and host cultures. This readjustment included getting used to the urban configuration of the home country, having (or not having) public transportation (e.g., metro, bus system, biking, tube), and other modes of commuting. For example, one participant said that she “missed walking and how close everything was.” Overall, the differences in transportation systems reflected urban peculiarities of the host country environment compared to those in the home country.

Culture. The theme “culture” encompassed participants’ struggles readjusting to specific habits and customs in the home country (e.g., food, clothing, shopping practices, money, sports, religion, time). For example, one participant explained feeling “most uncomfortable with the wealth and waste of this country (in the U.S.).” Another example was making direct comparisons between the home and the host culture, such as: “Some of the customs in Japan were so much more sincere than those in America and it was upsetting to be from a country where we are not very sincere/considerate.” Some participants struggled readjusting to broad cultural differences such as time orientation: “I think Americans have a tendency to overdo it and be too future-oriented, to the point that they don’t focus on the present or really care about the past at all.”

Lifestyle. The theme “lifestyle” reflected participants’ difficulties readapting to their former routine or pace of life in the home country (e.g., slower or faster, more or less exciting than abroad). One participant specifically mentioned that, in the city where she studied abroad, “life was a bit more frenetic,” while another was frustrated with “the fast-moving pace in the United States, which was hard to revert back to.” Even though lifestyle may appear as insignificant, it often represented a major difficulty for time management and stress. For students who experienced a slower pace of life abroad, it was a shock going back to the frenetic U.S. model: “People in America just go! The other countries go day by day and enjoy most little things that people in America don’t even have time for!”

Loss of Independence. Another common theme was the loss of independence, which refers to returners' real or perceived loss of freedom and autonomy after living abroad. This was common among students who went back to live with their parents, even for a short period of time. As one student described, "I got used to living alone and doing stuff on my own; when I came back I missed the lifestyle in general." Similarly, another student said that the most difficult part was "losing my space and time by living again with my parents."

Nostalgia. The theme of nostalgia reflected a sense of sentimental longing, affection, and homesickness toward the host country, often activated by participants reminiscing about memories from their study abroad location. Describing her desire to go back abroad and spend more time with her friends, one student mentioned, "Wanting to be back for the next semester and missing the friends I gained." Another participant mentioned feeling incomplete leaving her new friends: "I felt mournful when I returned because I wasn't finished getting to know the people I met." In other cases, nostalgia acted as a coping mechanism to deal with the loss of the study abroad experience, as exemplified by the following quote: "I was genuinely just trying to realize the fact that things were never gonna be the same. Also leaving everyone I had become so close to was hard."

Intercultural Identity. The last theme, "intercultural identity," refers to returners' self-awareness of change, growth, and transformation coming back. Consistent with previous literature, it also reflects returners' (in)ability to fit in with the home country. According to Kim (2008), students come back with new eyes to see the world, as they integrate their old and new self to develop their "intercultural personhood." One student explained her feelings of estrangement: "When I came back, I didn't feel like I belonged. My home wasn't overseas, but it didn't feel like I belonged here either." The struggle of fitting back was accentuated by students' awareness that, while *they* had gone through a profound transformation, people around them stayed the same (Sussman, 2000). One participant said, "I had changed so much and I somewhat expected my home environment to have changed as well. ... I

was the one thing that had changed.” Overall, intercultural identity was crucial to understand the struggles mentioned above, as students used self-disclosure to reflect on and explain to others their new integrated identity of who they were and who they have become.

RQ4: What was the most difficult aspect of talking about returning home after studying abroad?

The fourth research question was different from the previous one because it positioned the reentry within the communicative context. Rather than simply asking the most difficult aspects of returning home, RQ4 asked about the most difficult aspect of *talking* about one’s experience and the reasons behind self-disclosing behaviors during the reentry. A total of eight themes emerged: intercultural identity, lack of understanding, mindful communication, time, negative experiences, the value of studying abroad, cultural differences, and the indescribability of the experience.

Intercultural Identity. The theme of intercultural identity emerged again in RQ4, as participants described their challenges *talking* about reentry. As one participant said, these challenges were related to their identity *enacted* through communication: “Trying to define yourself again was very difficult. It also felt like everyone expected me to be the same, but I felt different.” Through communication, returning students explored “the feeling of being out of place” and tried to communicate it to their loved ones.

Lack of Understanding. Another challenge was found in people’s lack of understanding listening to returners’ stories. Participants were frustrated by people’s inability to fully understand, relate to, and ask questions about their experience. As one participant said, “The hardest part of talking about my reentry was people not fully listening, they don’t care about the experience...they don’t even ask.” Participants also reported that sometimes people “felt obligated to ask about their travelling,” and that “not everyone cared or could understand” what reverse culture shock was like. Returning students did not feel supported by their loved ones: “Other people didn’t seem to understand, and they eventually grew annoyed that I wanted to continuously talk about the trip.” Participants often

considered their relationships at home “shallower and more superficial” than those formed abroad because they felt there was a part of them they could not share.

Mindful Communication. The theme mindful communication captures returning students’ strategies to navigate interpersonal interactions, construct messages, and figure out when and how to speak about their experiences. Through mindful communication, returning students were able to tailor their experience to accommodate the listener, trying to be considerate, checking self-perceptions, assessing social, cultural, religious taboos, and gauging interest level of the listener. Participants expressed not being able to be completely honest because they were afraid of being perceived as superior, hypercritical, rude, selfish, and arrogant toward the other person. One participant mentioned, “I didn’t want to appear as though I was bragging or boasting about my experience. It’s something not everyone can experience, and I wanted to be mindful of that.” Many participants feared becoming like a “broken record,” so they avoided talking in detail about their experience. In addition, returners did not want to share too much because they did not want to make “unfair comparisons” between the home and the host country. As one participant explained, “I couldn’t really talk about my host family and my exchange friends because I didn’t want anyone to feel worse.” As a result of mindful communication, participants gradually learned to “stop themselves after talking too long,” while other students had to “hold back experiences because they didn’t want their friends to feel bad.”

Negative Experiences. The theme “negative experiences” refers to returners’ inability to talk about difficult, challenging, and traumatic aspects of their experience that would trigger negative emotions (e.g., nostalgia, alienation, guilt, fear). As a returning student mentioned, “Talking about the experience was like opening a Pandora’s box and I know I couldn’t deal with the feeling that I knew would come out of it just yet.” Because of that, returning students struggled talking about both the good and the bad of their experience, as people wanted to hear only about the positive aspects. As one student mentioned, “They often expected a happy and sugarcoated answer, but it was not always like

this.” Since they feared oversharing, criticizing their home culture, or feeling misunderstood, they struggled with being authentic, thus increasing interpersonal distance with their loved ones.

Time. As shown by previous literature, time can alleviate the negative effects of reverse culture shock (Pitts, 2016). As one participant explained, “It took me a while to fully disclose all the memories I had.” Participants often talked about how time could slow down or speed up the readjustment. As one student explained, readjusting home was part of a process that was hard to communicate: “It took about 3 months until I felt ‘back to normal.’” Finally, time played an important role in subsequent reentries: “Every time I return to America for the summer, the reentry is easier. The first time was the most difficult, but every time got easier. I think it’s because I have prepared myself mentally for some of the challenges that I expect so they don’t take me quite so much by surprise.”

Cultural Differences. As mentioned above (RQ3), it was difficult for returners to talk about cultural differences between the home and the host country. Sometimes, cultural differences represented roadblocks to address because people at home had no frame of reference to understand the cultural nuances of the study abroad location.

Indescribability of Studying Abroad. Another challenge of talking about their study abroad was related to the magic and unique atmosphere of the time abroad. Returning students often recognized the inadequacy of language to faithfully capture everything they experienced. As one participant described, “It’s so much to describe and explain. The thing I want to talk about won’t make sense to people who weren’t there.” These experiences were hard to describe because they were uniquely fitted to participants: “It was like any other experience that was uniquely your own. Since no one else had been through it, it was tough to try and describe in detail.”

Value of Studying Abroad. The final theme was the value of studying abroad. Despite the negative aspects of reentry, participants expressed a strong feeling of accomplishment in their choice of studying abroad and they were eager to recommend this experience to others. “I believe everyone

should spend extended time out of the United States. It opens your eyes to the differences in our world.” Consistent with Koyanagi’s (2018) findings, even short-term study abroad opportunities have the potential to modify cognitive appraisals and increase cultural sensitivity.

RQ5: (a) To whom and (b) why were students more likely to disclose their study abroad experience after returning home?

To answer RQ5(a), frequencies were calculated to record the number and type of relationship to whom participants felt most comfortable talking. For RQ5(b), narratives were coded a priori based on the final codebook developed for this research question. Finally, frequencies of people mentioned and the reasons provided were cross-tabulated to identify the most frequently mentioned reasons for disclosure among each group of people.

To Whom. Results suggest that returning students felt most comfortable disclosing with eight types of interpersonal relationships: family, friends, romantic partner, counselor/academic adviser, fellow study abroad students, people who have been abroad, other people, and nobody. Results (see Table 4) suggest that participants felt the most comfortable disclosing to friends who have been abroad (29.6%), parents (24.5%), romantic partners (11%), and fellow study abroad students (9.8%). Although most students were able to find someone in whom they could confide, results highlighted a small yet alarming number of students who did not feel comfortable talking to anyone. “Not having anyone to talk to,” “Nobody,” “No one really,” and “I felt nobody could understand me,” were common answers among returning students. As one student mentioned, “The most difficult aspect is not really having anyone to talk to. You can’t talk about how returning home has been really tough without making other people feel bad, and make it sound like it’s somewhat their fault.”

Reason for Self-Disclosure. Five major reasons for self-disclosure emerged: similar background or experience abroad, shared understanding and empathy, interest in the experience

abroad, staying in contact during the experience abroad, and not feeling judged. ⁶The definition of each reason as a theme and the verbatim quotations from the transcripts are presented in the Appendix.

When examining the relationship between to whom students disclosed and why, eight prominent pairs (Table 5) yielded, based on two criteria: (1) The “who” choice was one of the top four (by frequency), and (2) the reasons mentioned were among the top two (by frequency). In their open-ended responses, participants said it was easier to talk to: “People who lived abroad because they shared a similar travel mindset and they could better understand what it felt going through reverse culture shock.” Notably, many participants did not provide an explicit reason why they chose to disclose to some people, possibly because they already mentioned with whom they felt most comfortable talking.

Discussion

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to examine the role of self-disclosure to predict reverse culture shock and the level of difficulty at different stages of reentry. While this was not the first study to frame cross-cultural readaptation from a communicative perspective (Pitts, 2016), it was among the first to examine the role of specific dimensions of self-disclosure in students’ readaptation using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. As highlighted by RQ3, the struggles of talking about their experience were often amplified by common challenges like readjusting to the language, education, bureaucracy, interpersonal relationships, social norms, culture, lifestyle, loss of independence, nostalgia, and intercultural identity (Marsh, 1975). The next sections review the role of self-disclosure during the reentry highlighting theoretical and practical implications of this study.

The Role of Self-Disclosure

Intent

⁶ Reasons that did not fit in any of the five major categories were coded as “Other Reasons” (See Appendix). Similarly, narratives that did not provide a reason for disclosure were coded as “No Reason Provided.”

Within the dimensions of self-disclosure, intent predicted difficulty during the reverse culture shock phase. The dimension of intent suggests that the more students were intentional and mindful in their disclosures, the less difficulty they experienced during that phase. When students were fully aware of their feelings, their difficulty during the reverse culture shock phase decreased. This positive effect of intent was confirmed by the theme of mindful communication, which showed that participants paid close attention to what, to whom, how, and for how long they shared their experiences. Since mindfulness is associated with specific skills and affective behaviors (Smith, 2001), intent during self-disclosure could be associated to students' intercultural communication competence (Barker, 2016), as students considered when, to whom, how, and how much to disclose in their interpersonal interactions. The following excerpt provided an example of this interpersonal dynamic:

“It was hard to figure out how to tell my ‘abroad’ stories in such a way that they would be understandable to other Americans. In general, I didn’t have any problem SHARING stories about my time abroad with others once I came home. It was figuring out how to tell the stories WELL, and respectfully, that was more difficult.”

Honesty

The dimension of honesty significantly predicted three of the four dimensions of reverse culture shock suggesting that the more students were honest in their disclosures, the less cultural, interpersonal, and emotional distance they experienced. Rather than trying to pretend that nothing had changed, honest and sincere disclosures allowed returners to talk about how they felt about the home country (cultural distance), their close relationships (interpersonal distance), and their emotions (emotional distance). By revealing their true emotions, students verbally articulated new and unexpected discrepancies between their home and host culture, possibly decreasing feelings of reverse culture shock and difficulty during the reverse culture shock and readjustment phases. As Pitts (2009)

suggests, readaptation is largely a communicative process, as students use language to (re)define themselves and reconcile the sense of disconnect between the old and the new intercultural identity.

Despite the positive effects of honesty, the qualitative results suggest that there might be some possible barriers during the reentry, because students who were fully transparent had a higher chance to be hurt by the lack of responsiveness, interest, and sensitivity of their loved ones. Moreover, some participants mentioned that they could not be completely honest because they were afraid of being perceived as superior, hypercritical, rude, and arrogant for always talking about their experience.

Valence and Depth

The dimensions of valence and depth highlighted possible negative effects of self-disclosure because they respectively increased feelings of emotional distance and interpersonal distance. Concerning valence (i.e., positively valenced disclosures), students who mostly disclosed positive aspects of their time abroad were more likely to experience greater homesickness and nostalgia (i.e., emotional distance), possibly because reminiscing their exciting adventures made them feel melancholy and increased their longing for the host culture. Similarly, students who engaged in deeper self-disclosures (i.e., depth) were more likely to experience tensions and feelings of interpersonal distance in their close relationships. This finding aligned with the qualitative theme of interpersonal relationships (RQ4), which reflected students' difficulty reestablishing close relationships. As Martin (1986) suggests, this could be explained by the fact that returning students considered interactions with family and friends as more superficial and less satisfying than before, possibly in light of their increased maturity and new intercultural identity after studying abroad.

Returners' Demographic Characteristics and Reentry Experience

Overall, students' demographic characteristics were significantly associated with their reentry adjustment. Our results suggest that female students were more likely to experience more cultural, interpersonal, and emotional distance compared to males (RQ1), and were more likely to struggle

during the reverse culture shock and readjustment phases (RQ2), possibly because women reported more anxiety and stress with a significant other during the reentry (Brabant et al., 1990). Duration of studying abroad also significantly predicted interpersonal distance (RQ1) and difficulty during the readjustment phase (RQ2), probably because students who stayed longer in the host country had more time to get used to their life abroad compared to those who remained for a shorter period of time. While education predicted difficulty during the honeymoon phase, age predicted difficulty during the readjustment phase (RQ2). More educated students had less difficulty as soon as they returned home (honeymoon), while older students had more difficulty in the readjustment phase compared to their younger counterparts, possibly because they might have more established lifestyles and it might be harder for them to readjust to their home culture (Moore et al., 1987).

Self-Disclosure and Interpersonal Relationships

Findings also suggest that the type and nature of relationships influenced students' level of comfort and choice to disclose during interpersonal interactions. Our findings on relationship type extend Rohrlich and Martin's (1991) work, which included diverse relationships characterized by different levels of caring and commitment. Among the most common interpersonal relationships (i.e., family, friends, romantic partner, fellow study abroad students), students felt most comfortable disclosing to people who had a similar background, could fully understand, were interested in their story, and did not judge them (RQ5). On the contrary, when students anticipated a lack of understanding or possible judgment, they carefully weighed disclosures based on the information, interest, and anticipated response of the other person (RQ5).

Theoretical Implications

These findings carry important theoretical implications. First, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by examining the relationship between self-disclosure and reverse culture shock using the W-Curve model (see Figure 2). Second, this study employs a mixed-method approach

using a diverse sample of international college students. While most studies have adopted either quantitative or qualitative methods, this study interprets the quantitative results *in light of* the qualitative narratives, providing rich and nuanced details uncommon in the current literature (Creswell et al., 2003). Third, data were collected from international college students from all over the world and who studied abroad in different countries, not only students from U.S. universities. While it is not possible to generalize the results to the entire population of study abroad students, such a culturally diverse sample is rare to find in cross-cultural literature (Nasif et al., 1991) and might illuminate characteristics of self-disclosure and reverse culture shock that transcends country-specific samples.

Contrary to our expectations, the quantitative findings suggested that only some of the original dimensions of self-disclosure significantly predicted dimensions of reverse culture shock and difficulty during phases of the W-Curve. If communication is such an integral part of readaptation, why didn't self-disclosure emerge as a significant predictor to facilitate the reentry? First, it is possible that self-disclosure alone may not be enough to help students manage the most difficult aspects of reentry. Since this study defined self-disclosure as voluntarily sharing information with another person that would normally be unavailable to others, students' self-disclosures might have been more superficial in nature. In other words, just because students engaged in self-disclosure, it does not mean they engaged in deeper sense-making that helped managing the negative feelings of reverse culture shock.

Second, dimensions of self-disclosure might have not emerged as strong predictors of reverse culture shock because this study did not measure self-disclosure as a function of reciprocity (i.e., the other person's willingness to respond to the students' disclosures with their own disclosures). Previous studies have found that reciprocity was a key aspect of self-disclosure, as people were likely to reciprocate the original disclosure even when they felt little attraction for the initial discloser (Omarzu, 2000). In this case, students' self-disclosure depended on the perceived level of support from family, friends, and loved ones. If students experienced strong interpersonal tensions, their willingness to

disclose probably decreased, thus making the dimensions of self-disclosure less likely to predict reverse culture shock and difficulty during the reentry. The qualitative data confirmed this explanation, as most students reported that people could not fully understand, cared about, or relate to their experience. This lack of interest and perceived social support might have lowered students' willingness to disclose, thus lowering the predictive power of this construct.

Third, this study *assumed* that returning students were eager to talk about their experience, and it did not consider those who preferred to deal with the effects of reverse culture shock by themselves. In other words, it is possible that the dimensions of self-disclosure did not emerge as significant predictors because students did not engage in self-disclosure with their interpersonal network or because they preferred using alternative channels to make sense of their experience (e.g., blogging, social media, and online forums and communities).

Finally, while self-disclosure might not always predict reverse culture shock or difficulty during all the four phases of the W-Curve, it is important to consider that managing the effects of reverse culture shock should not be the "ultimate" goal – rather, students' overall readaptation should be the focus. The small to medium effects that our study reported could be due to the fact that reverse culture shock was a temporary state that all returners experienced upon reentry; therefore, communication played a small role in facilitating or hindering the overall readaptation.

Practical Implications

This study also offers practical implications for families and study abroad programs developing resources for returning students. To guarantee a smoother reentry, students are encouraged to become familiar with the effects of reverse culture shock and consider the role of communication, especially intent and honesty, in their self-disclosures. While intentional and mindful communication can decrease difficulty during the reverse culture shock phase, honesty might produce mixed outcomes. On one hand, honest disclosure helps to make sense of the experience in close relationships; on the other

hand, it may not be acceptable (or desirable) in small talk, as students might be perceived as arrogant, judgmental, or hypercritical of the home culture. Therefore, returning students might benefit from honestly sharing their feelings with people they trust and care about their experience. Additional strategies to engage in intentional communication include attending workshops, promoting cross-cultural awareness, and connecting with other study abroad students in the area. While most students felt they had someone to talk to, it is somewhat alarming that only *one* participant felt comfortable sharing their experience with a counselor, and that at least four students felt they had nobody to talk to during the reentry. Sometimes students were dealing with negative experiences that they could not share with family and friends (e.g., robbery, sexual and verbal assault, and accidents), so they turned to other people with experience abroad. Since family and friends may not be able to provide adequate support to deal with depression and anxiety (Gaw, 2000), professional counseling and support groups should take part in providing them a safer space to disclose.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite all the merits, this study is not without limitations. The first one is related to the demographic characteristics of the sample. Despite its cultural diversity, the sample mostly included White, female, college students from Westernized countries. Since this was not a representative sample, the results cannot be extended to the entire population of study abroad students. The results should be interpreted in light of the authors' recruitment strategies (i.e., convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling), as the results might have been affected by unique characteristics of participants who naturally self-selected into this study and wanted to share their experience.

The second major limitation was the low reliability scores for some of the instruments adapted from Fray's (1988) Homecomer Culture Shock Scale and Wheelless' (1978) General Disclosiveness Scale (i.e., intent, $\alpha = .62$). Despite the revisions from the pilot study, the CFA analysis highlighted issues of low reliability and content validity of some items. These problematics could be explained by

the fact that (a) Fray's (1988) scale was originally developed for the reentry of missionary children, (b) each sub-scale had a low number of items, and (c) the sub-dimensions of self-disclosure and reverse culture shock were part of a larger construct and might have reported lower reliability when treated separately. For example, since moral values are part of more complex cultural patterns, the sub-dimension moral distance could be part of cultural distance, rather than being seen as a separate one.

In addition, researchers should use longitudinal designs to continue to explore the role of disclosure during each phase of reentry and possible antecedents of reverse culture shock, such as personality traits. Online communication during the reentry should also be examined since returning students may rely on social media or other mediated communication forms for self-disclosure. If technology allows students to bridge geographical barriers during their sojourn, it can also help them cope with nostalgia and remain connected with the host culture (Pitts, 2016).

Finally, this study relied on retrospective, self-reported data that might have been subject to the passage of time or participants' distortion after their reentry. Participants might have inaccurately reported interpersonal challenges, and possibly omitted details concerning their reentry. In addition, since this study only considered the returners' perspectives, future studies should examine the experience of their significant others to triangulate and extend current findings.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this mixed-method study was to investigate the effects of self-disclosure and reverse culture shock among students who returned home after studying abroad. Evidence from the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that self-disclosure plays an important role in students' overall readaptation. As Martin (1986) so eloquently said, "It is through communication that the sojourner reenters" (p. 5), finding a sense of "wholeness" within the place and people once called "home." Nevertheless, students' disclosures may not always be beneficial. Students had to carefully evaluate the goal of the interaction, the content and context of the disclosure, the relationship type, as well as

the characteristics and expected reactions of the other person. Participants reported that they gradually had to “consciously tailor” their stories to avoid monopolizing the conversation. Failure to consider these aspects might result in frustrating and alienating interpersonal interactions for returning students, as they considered possible barriers to their own disclosures. Future studies should continue to explore the relationship between self-disclosure and reverse culture shock to develop effective strategies to best support students and their families during the reentry.

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Tables

Table 1.

Participants' Demographic Information

Characteristic	Response	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	66	23.2
	Female	219	76.8
	No Response	0	0.0
Education	High School or Less	61	21.4
	Associate Degree	10	3.5
	Bachelor Degree	141	49.5
	Master Degree	71	24.9
	Doctorate Degree	2	0.7
	No Response	0	0.0
Home Continent	Europe	147	51.6
	North America	98	34.4
	Central and South America	4	1.4
	Asia	4	1.4
	Africa and Middle East	4	1.4
	Oceania	1	0.3
	No Response	27	9.5
Host Continent	Europe	149	52.3
	North America	76	26.7
	Central and South America	11	3.9
	Asia	24	8.4
	Africa and Middle East	8	2.8
	Oceania	3	1.0
	No Response	14	4.9
Times Study Abroad	Once	243	85.3
	Two Times	29	10.2
	Three Times	5	1.8
	More than Three Times	1	0.3
	No Response	7	2.4
Length of Study Abroad	Less than one 5 weeks	10	3.5
	Between 1 and 2 months	14	4.9
	Between 3 months and 6 months	94	33.0
	Between 7 months and 1 year	90	31.6
	More than one year	25	8.4
More than two years	53	18.6	

	No Response	0	0.0
People Abroad with You	Siblings	4	1.4
	Friends	13	4.6
	Romantic Partner	20	7.0
	Study Abroad Organization	55	19.3
	No One	155	54.4
	University Colleagues	13	4.5
	Other	10	3.5
	No Response	15	5.3
Family Experience Abroad	Yes	203	71.2
	No	77	27.0
	No Response	5	1.8

Table 2.

Regression Results for Self-Disclosure on Reverse Culture Shock (RQ1)

	DV: Cultural Distance					DV: Interpersonal Distance					DV: Emotional Distance				
	β	t	sr	SE	Total R^2	β	t	sr	SE	Total R^2	β	t	sr	SE	Total R^2
Block 1:															
	.07					.09					.03				
Age	.13	1.73	.11	.01		.01	.10	.01	.01		-.08	-1.11	-.07	.01	
Gender	.16	2.65**	.16	.11		.23	3.77***	.23	.11		.15	2.40**	.15	.13	
Education	-.06	-.84	-.05	.05		-.11	-1.53	-.09	.05		.03	.43	.03	.06	
# Study Abroad	.06	.96	.06	.11		.07	1.17	.07	.11		.13	1.68	.10	.13	
Abroad Duration	.13	2.00	.12	.04		.18	2.77**	.17	.04		.05	.60	.04	.05	
	$F(5, 259) = 3.71, p = .003, adj.R^2 = .05$					$F(5, 260) = 5.12, p = .000, adj.R^2 = .07$					$F(5, 263) = 1.84, p = .106, adj.R^2 = .02$				
Block 2:															
	.11					.14					.10				
Age	.14	1.88	.13	.01		.02	.23	.01	.01		-.06	-.84	-.05	.01	
Gender	.15	2.45*	.15	.11		.20	3.40***	.21	.11		.15	2.39*	.15	.13	
Education	-.04	-.56	-.04	.05		-.08	-1.56	-.07	.05		.05	.66	.04	.06	
# Study Abroad	.06	.99	.06	.11		.07	1.08	.07	.11		.11	1.72	.11	.13	
Abroad Duration	.12	1.90	.12	.04		.17	2.62**	.16	.04		.04	.67	.04	.05	
Intent	.04	.55	.03	.07		.04	.67	.04	.07		-.02	-.30	-.02	.09	
Amount	.04	.49	.03	.06		-.02	-.23	-.02	.06		.11	1.44	.09	.07	
Valence	.07	.99	.06	.08		.01	.12	-.01	.08		.14	2.07*	.13	.10	
Depth	.08	1.01	.06	.06		.16	2.15*	.13	.06		.10	1.33	.08	.07	
Honesty	-.22	-3.33***	-.20	.06		-.25	-3.81***	-.23	.06		-.17	-2.65**	-.16	.08	
	$F_{change}(5, 254) = 2.62, p = .025, f^2 = .04$					$F_{change}(5, 255) = 3.27, p = .007, f^2 = .06$					$F_{change}(5, 258) = 4.01, p = .002, f^2 = .08$				

Note: DV=Moral Distance was not reported in this table since the models were not significant; sr: semipartial correlation; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3.

Regression Results for Self-Disclosure on the Level of Difficulty Students Experienced in the Four Phases of the W-Curve (RQ2)

	DV: Honeymoon					DV: Reverse Culture Shock					DV: Readjustment				
	β	<i>t</i>	<i>sr</i>	<i>SE</i>	Total R^2	β	<i>t</i>	<i>sr</i>	<i>SE</i>	Total R^2	β	<i>t</i>	<i>sr</i>	<i>SE</i>	Total R^2
Block 1:															
Age	-.01	-1.16	-.01	.02	.05	.09	1.11	.07	.02	.03	.15	1.99*	.13	.02	.12
Gender	.08	1.28	.08	.28		.15	2.38*	.15	.25		.18	2.89**	.18	.27	
Education	-.18	-2.44*	-.16	.13		-.10	-1.32	-.08	.12		.00	.00	.00	.13	
# Study Abroad	-.03	-.49	-.03	.28		-.04	-.65	-.04	.25		.03	.49	.03	.27	
Abroad Duration	.11	1.56	.10	.10		-.02	-.30	-.02	.09		.24	3.58***	.22	.10	
<i>F</i> (5, 238) = 2.57, <i>p</i> = .028, <i>adj.R</i> ² = .03					<i>F</i> (5, 258) = 1.83, <i>p</i> = .108, <i>adj.R</i> ² = .02					<i>F</i> (5, 245) = 6.81, <i>p</i> = .000, <i>adj.R</i> ² = .10					
Block 2:															
Age	-.01	-1.14	-.01	.02	.07	.11	1.39	.09	.02	.09	.16	2.16*	.14	.02	.15
Gender	.08	1.18	.08	.28		.15	2.48*	.15	.25		.17	2.80**	.18	.27	
Education	-.18	-2.42*	-.16	.13		-.08	-1.18	-.07	.11		.01	.17	.01	.13	
# Study Abroad	-.03	-.45	-.03	.29		-.04	-.64	-.04	.24		.03	.47	.03	.27	
Abroad Duration	.14	1.94	.13	.10		-.04	-.57	-.04	.09		.22	3.26***	.21	.10	
Intent	.05	.68	.04	.19		-.14	-2.15*	-.13	.17		-.05	-.73	-.05	.18	
Amount	-.02	-.28	-.02	.15		.09	1.14	.07	.13		.05	.64	.04	.15	
Valence	.02	.32	.02	.20		.09	1.25	.08	.18		.03	.44	.03	.21	
Depth	.10	1.29	.08	.16		.09	1.13	.07	.14		.04	.55	.04	.15	
Honesty	.03	.46	.03	.16		-.16	-2.37*	-.15	.14		-.16	-2.34*	-.15	.16	
<i>F</i> _{change} (5, 233) = .92, <i>p</i> = .466, <i>f</i> ² = .02					<i>F</i> _{change} (5, 253) = 3.20, <i>p</i> = .008, <i>f</i> ² = .07					<i>F</i> _{change} (5, 240) = 1.48, <i>p</i> = .199, <i>f</i> ² = .04					

Note: DV=Pre-Departure was not reported in this table since the models were not significant; *sr*: semipartial correlation; **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001

Table 4.

The Groups of People to Whom Participants Were Willing to Talk about Study Abroad

Experience (RQ5)

Relationship	N	Percent
Family	16	6.5%
<i>Parents: Mom/Dad</i>	60	24.5%
<i>Siblings: Brother/Sister</i>	16	6.5%
<i>Other Family Members</i>	6	2.4%
Friends	64	26.1%
<i>Best Friend/Close Friends at Home</i>	36	14.7%
<i>Friends who have been abroad</i>	48	29.6%
<i>New Friends</i>	7	2.9%
Romantic Partner	27	11%
Counselor/Academic Adviser/Mentor	1	0.4%
Fellow Study Abroad Students	24	9.8%
People who have been abroad	18	7.3%
Other people	22	9%
Nobody	4	1.6%

Note: The total percentage does not add up to 100% because some participants reported more than one group of people they talked with. The percentage was calculated out of the 246 narratives from participants' open-ended responses.

Table 5.

The Groups of People to Whom Participants Were Willing to Talk about Study Abroad

Experience and the Reasons Associated to This Choice (RQ5)

Who (Highest-Lowest Frequency Top 4)	Why (Highest Frequency Top 2)	N / Total	Percentage
Friends who have been abroad	No explicit reason	21/48	43.8%
	Similar background or cultural experience abroad	18/48	37.5%
Friends	No explicit reason	28/64	43.8%
	Showed interest/Was proud or happy	10/64	15.6%
Parents: Mom/Dad	Showed interest/Was proud or happy	18/60	30%
	No explicit reason	17/60	28.3%
Best friends/Close friends	No explicit reason	13/36	36.1%
	Similar background or cultural experience abroad	8/36	22.2%

Figures

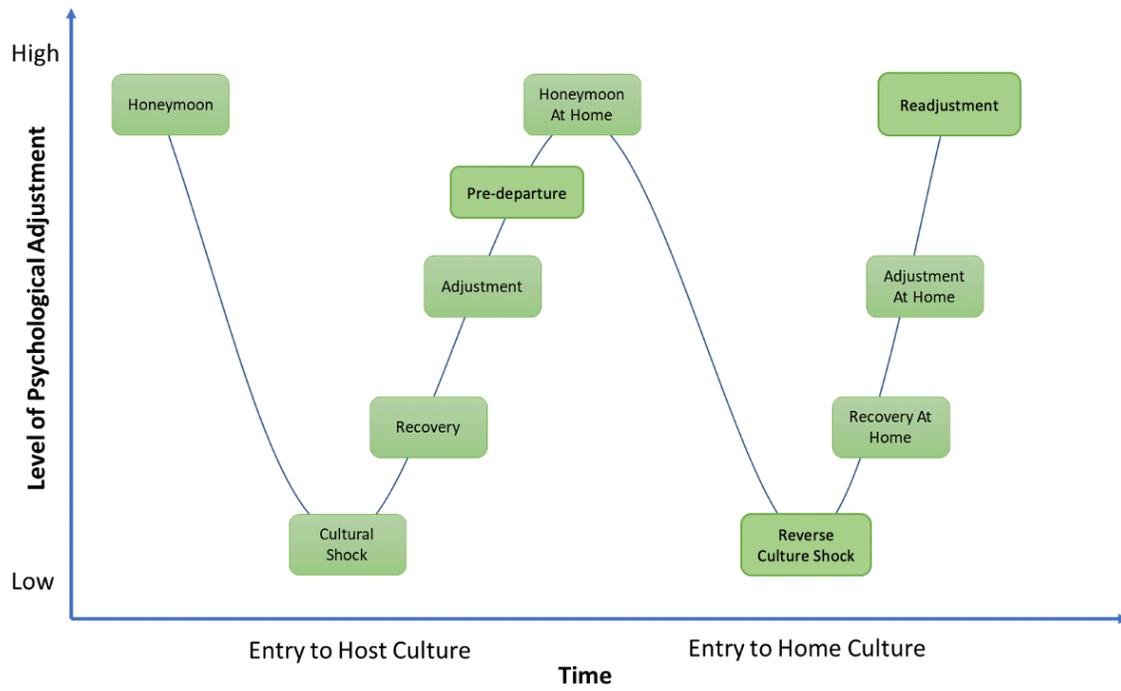


Figure 1. A visualization of the W-Curve model based on Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963).

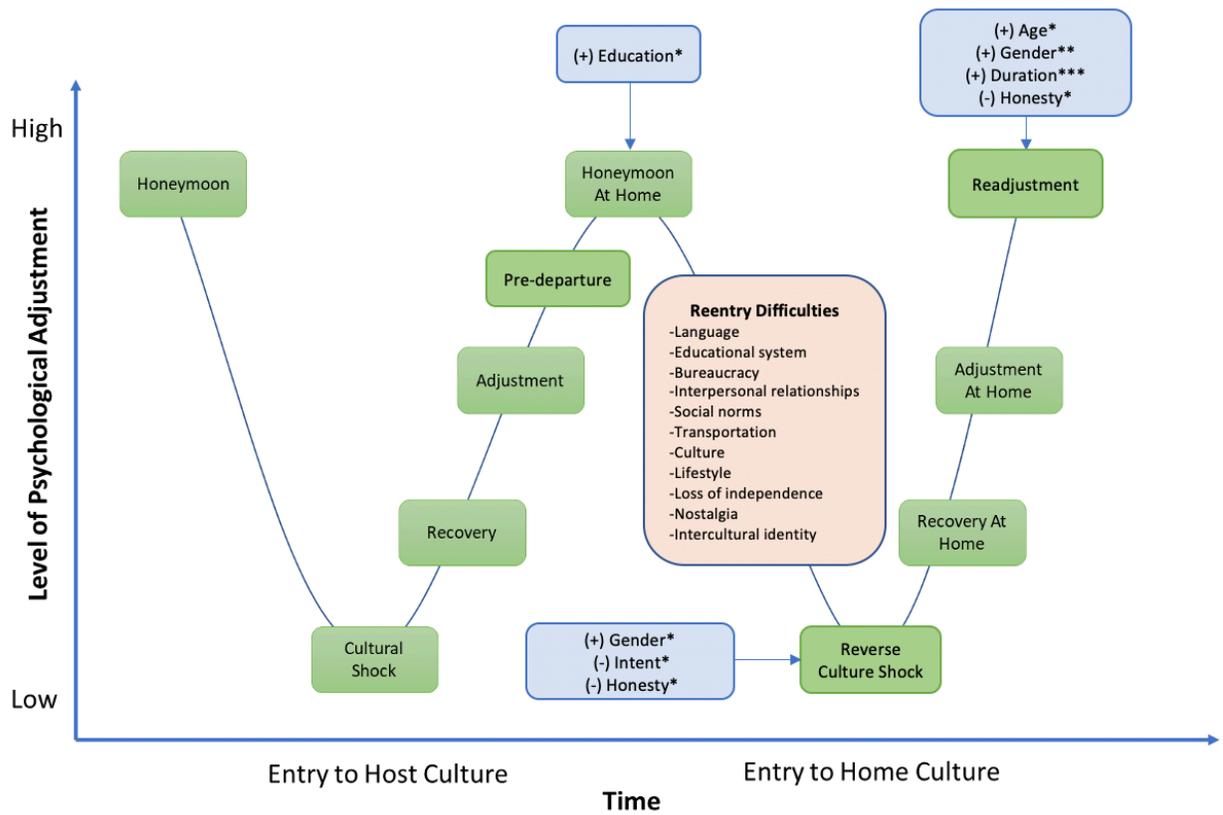


Figure 2. A visualization of Gullahorn and Gullahorn's (1963) W-Curve model with the findings of this study.