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# Reflections on Reentry: A Qualitative Study of Cross-Cultural Reentry Experiences of International Cultural Exchange Students

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Reflections on Reentry:  
A Qualitative Study of Cross-Cultural Reentry Experiences of  
International Cultural Exchange Students

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A dissertation in practice submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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and self-sacrifice. Thank you for all that you do and all that you are.

To Melvin W. Cox, my dear father. Because of the safety and security that you have provided

throughout my life, I have been able to take risks and follow my dreams.

### Abstract

This qualitative study explores the reentry experiences of eight J-1 cultural exchange scholars from Bangladesh, Colombia, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, South Africa, and Pakistan. Participants had spent 10 months in the United States as part of a college program designed to promote diplomatic relationships with developing countries. The theoretical framework draws from three major categories in reentry literature: affective, cognitive, and behavioral adjustments. The findings show how changes in habits and behaviors, the expectations of self and others, and changes in worldviews impact perceptions of self and cultural belonging. Also, the findings include a case study of reentry trauma as a result of returning to gender and religious oppression. The discussion section explores how global systems of oppression and U.S. relations with developing nations exacerbate the challenges during participants' reentry.

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Reflections on Reentry: A Qualitative Study of Cross-Cultural Reentry Experiences of  
International Cultural Exchange Students

*“And I stay there  
Sitting on a train station  
But not knowing where to go  
Trains keep coming on both directions  
But none take me to my destination  
And I stay there  
Sitting on a train station*

*However painful, that was an important part of my life, for it shows some of the pain and the confusion of coming back home after a deep and meaningful experience. What to do? What I have learned? How to convey the experience I had to family and friends? How do I function in a group/society that no longer accepts me or understands me? How do I live without people I learned to love? What if I am a different person now? Do people see me differently? Do they think I am snobbish? Have I changed? These are but some of the questions that passed to my mind while going through that journey.”*

*-Wesley Silva de Oliveira*

Wesley returned to Brazil in 2013 after spending ten months in the United States on a cultural exchange scholarship. While in the United States, he thrived as a student and informal ambassador for his country. His love of learning, joyful spirit, compassion towards all humanity, and ambitions of intercultural understanding were not only apparent in the way he moved through the world but also quite contagious to those with whom he interacted. He saw the United States through a lens of optimism and hope; he felt accepted, encouraged, and supported in his mission to make the world a better place. He had the perception that the barriers to self-expression that he had experienced in Brazil, such as socioeconomic status, race, and sexuality, were not enforced while he was studying abroad; thus, he was able to be who he wanted to be rather than what society dictated he should be. However, when he returned home, he felt once again that his identity itself was a barrier to his goals and pursuits.

“I vividly remember, while taking public transport, just sitting there for two or three hours straight, watching life go by, watching people come and go, without being able to move, to stand up or take the train to go home or anywhere else” (Wesley Silva de Oliveira, personal communication, April 30, 2016). The stresses upon returning home were vast and complicated. His first goal was to finish his university degree and then find a job that could allow his mother, who had raised her children alone by working as a cleaner, to retire. Complex feelings arose: gratitude versus guilt for having the opportunity to study abroad, obligation versus self-desire in the area of family responsibilities, and national pride versus disillusionment as the stark reality of societal inequities became exaggeratedly clear.

This conversation with Wesley piqued my interest in learning more about what happens after international students return home from their studies in the United States. As an educator in the field of international and cultural exchange, I felt compelled to focus my doctoral research on the stories that have been relatively unexplored by past researchers. Additionally, as an advocate for intercultural education, it is my responsibility to gain a more complete understanding of the impact of these educational experiences on the lives of the international population that we serve in institutions of higher education. From my context as a global educator, cultural exchange programs provide a depth to international education that would not exist without them. I wanted to know how former students experienced reentry to their home countries and how those experiences impact their perceptions of self and social belonging. I chose qualitative methods in order to provide richness and depth to the participants’ self-reflective reports on their lived reentry experiences.

There has been a long tradition of educating international students in the United States. This trend gained momentum after WWII with the conscious intent to strengthen the post-war



economy and bolster political affiliations through educational exchange (Selvadurai, 1998), and data show a steady increase in international enrollment from 1950 to 2018. While growth has slowed since 2016, there are currently 1.2 million F-1 (academic program) and M-1 (vocational or nonacademic program) nonimmigrant students and just under 210,000 J-1 (State Department designated exchange program) nonimmigrant international students registered and enrolled in higher education in the United States (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2018). With the overall population of students in colleges and universities at around 19.9 million (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts>), international students make up around 6% of Full Time Enrollments (FTEs).

International students enter U.S. colleges and universities for a variety of academic and personal reasons. According to the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System (SEVIS), the majority of these students are seeking undergraduate, graduate, or professional degrees to take home with them (<http://www.ice.gov/sevis>). Others study English to supplement degrees or certificates from their home countries or to improve business or interpersonal communication skills for life or work, and there are students who have been chosen by the Department of State for diplomatic or cultural exchange programs.

J-1 cultural exchange programs are envisaged as a tool for soft diplomacy and include programs for teachers, students, and workers. These programs are funded by the Department of State and are meant to “promote mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by educational and cultural exchanges” (<http://j1visa.state.gov/>). They were developed in response to the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act, also known as the Fulbright-Hayes Act of 1961. The U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs sponsors these programs.

After inheriting an economic recession, the Obama Administration directed State Department funding to support J-1 cultural exchange programs at the community colleges. “The [Initiative] provides a quality academic program at U.S. community colleges intended to build technical skills, enhance leadership capabilities, and strengthen English language proficiency. The program also provides opportunities for professional internships, service learning, and community engagement activities” (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange Programs, n.d.). Not only did the funding support the education and living expenses of the scholarship recipients, it also supported colleges financially through tuition and the creation of jobs. Additionally, the stipend money that the students received was infused into the surrounding communities. The 2014-2015 academic year was the sixth and last year of one specific program at a college in the northwestern United States, which will be referred to hereafter as Northwest College Program (NCP). NCP included three Northwest colleges as part of a consortium. The college was located in a suburban location within a small city located approximately 40 miles of three major cities. In 2015, the college demographics were as follows: 61% female and 39% male, average age of 27, African American 8%, Asian 10%, Multi-Race 11%, Other Races 7%, White 54%, and 10% not reported. According to the 2010 census, the surrounding community had similar racial demographics.

According to the NCP overview in the 2015-2016 student handbook, “[The program’s] goal is to strengthen other societies by developing capable young professionals who will acquire technical and professional skills, leadership abilities, and an understanding of American society, democracy, and culture.” Scholarship recipients were recruited from historically underserved populations. The NCP students came from developing nations and/or underrepresented populations in U.S. higher education; specifically, participants for this research study were from

Bangladesh, Colombia, Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Indonesia, Pakistan, and South Africa. Other countries represented in NCP were Ghana, Brazil, India, Turkey, and Kenya. There were also students who had finished a year of High School study abroad included in the fifth cohort, due to the impossibility of returning home to war in Yemen.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of former cultural exchange students from developing countries in order to understand reentry experiences on a deeper level, which can be used in designing in-program structures to support students' return home. This study does not aim to evaluate a specific cultural exchange program; future longitudinal research is needed to understand the extent of the effectiveness of J-1 programming on individuals, communities, and nations. What it aims to do is examine the reentry experiences of individuals returning to developing nations, as it is possible that the complex psychological and sociological adjustment processes experienced during reentry could have a negative impact on the overall cultural exchange experience.

In what comes next, I clarify the problem and rationale for this study, present a theoretical framework regarding reentry transition, review reentry literature, frame the research methodology used, present study findings, and finally, discuss the relevance of student experiences. The ultimate goal of this reentry research is to acknowledge the lived experiences of students who return to their home countries after studying abroad and use the findings to create better support structures for students while they are in the United States and during their transitions home. In particular, professionals in international education must create reentry supports for students who may be targets of oppression or stigmatization due to racism, sexism, religious persecution, heterosexism, or other identity-based oppressions.

### **Problem and Rationale**

Cultural exchange programs aim to provide opportunities for international students in order to increase global understanding and diplomatic relationships, while at the same time promoting personal and educational development of individual participants. The U.S. Bureau of International and Cultural Affairs states, “When you experience a different culture through educational and cultural exchange, you gain a deeper understanding of yourself and those around you—deepening your knowledge of foreign cultures and strengthening international relationships” (<http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/why-participate>). The funding provided by the Department of State combined with the required infrastructure needed for colleges to receive grant money for programs such as NCP demonstrates that there is an emphasis on providing supports for academic, psychological, social, and economic well-being while the students are studying in the United States. NCP students were provided with both academic and personal advisors, a pre-academic course in college preparation and intercultural exchange, access to tutoring, English language supports, connections with friendship host families, a variety of fun, social, and/or educational activities, a shared furnished apartment, and a stipend for personal spending. However, the funding does not provide for reentry supports upon student completion of the program.

There is extensive research regarding the experiences of international students who are studying in the United States and the programs that facilitate these experiences (Arthur, 2017; Dao & Chang, 2007; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Huong, Koo, Arambewela & Zutshi, 2017; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Klomegah, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mori, 2000; Mortenson, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Timimi 2004; Selvadurai, 1998; Wu, Garza &

Guzman, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003). However, there are gaps in the research regarding reentry of international students upon leaving the United States and returning home. The data collection by the State Department has been limited to points that are quantifiable such as employment or educational opportunities, but there is limited knowledge regarding the impacts of the cultural exchange programs on the students and their communities after they return home. More specifically, the research gap is widest when looking at the reentry experiences of underrepresented populations of international students, such as those from developing nations. Varied levels of difference between two cultures will influence cross-cultural reentry adjustment, as explored by Black et al (1992), Kidder (1992), Kogut and Singh (1988) and Triandis (1989), all of whom found that differences in cultural norms had a significant impact on re-acculturation processes. It is also important to note that there is a two-year home country residency requirement included in the stipulations of the J-1 visa, which means that individuals do not have the option to apply for other U.S. visas until the residency requirement has been fulfilled. This requirement can be waived in some situations, but for the majority of returnees, this policy makes the avoidance of reentry processes improbable. Additionally, participants in the NCP lack the socioeconomic privilege needed to return to the host country or emigrate elsewhere.

To summarize, the justification for this research is three-fold: 1) the NCP goals are grounded in the personal development of individuals through education and the impacts on their communities and nations post-study abroad, 2) the recipients are returning to countries with vastly different cultural norms than those of the United States, and 3) recipients are required to return home for at least two years at the end of the program. It is imperative that policy makers, educational administrators, and advisors know the lived reentry experiences J-1 cultural

exchange scholarship recipients in order to effectively support the transition and readjustment of returning to home countries and cultures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Adler (1981) defines reentry adjustment as the re-acculturation to one's home culture after spending an extended period of time living abroad; this is also known as cross-cultural reentry adjustment. The term "reentry", sometimes hyphenated as "re-entry", has since been operationalized across the literature when describing the phenomenon (Szkudlarek, 2010). The term encompasses all cross-border resettlement and return situations such as temporary sojourn or expatriation for business or leisure, missionary and volunteer work, temporary political asylum, and international education (Szkudlarek, 2010). Martin and Harrell (2004) conceptualized a three-pronged categorization of reentry adjustment: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. These three themes encompass the majority of reentry literature and can be used to conceptualize the process of reentry adjustment.

**Affective: u-curve and w-curve.** The literature regarding affective re-acculturation focuses on the areas of stress and coping. Lysgaard (1955) hypothesized the U-curve when describing cross-cultural adjustment, and Oberg (1960) later added to the model and modified the vocabulary. The U-curve model includes four phases: honeymoon/euphoria, crisis/culture shock, recovery/acculturation, and finally, stability. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) introduced the W-curve and included these four phases of cultural adjustment but extended the theory with the additive four phases of reentry: honeymoon, reverse culture shock, recovery, and adjustment. As the W-curve model lacks empirical research for support, there is critique in the literature regarding its validity. Onwumechili, Nwosu, Jackson and James-Hughes (2003) argued that

there are multiple re-acculturation processes as individuals negotiate the complex aspects of identity during transition. Extensive research regarding the psychological impacts during the reentry process has shown that individuals can be even more challenged by reentry than the initial expatriation (Adler, 1981; Baughn, 1995; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Linehan & Scullion, 2002; Martin, 1984). The Affective category explores feelings and emotions such as grief, isolation, and depression during reentry transitions.

**Cognitive: cultural identity model.** The Cultural Identity Model is bound by the assumption that international sojourners have had profound experiences that have shifted their perceptions of their own identities, relationships, and sense of belonging within cultural contexts, which then becomes evident in the reentry process. There are two notable interpretations of the Cultural Identity Model. Sussman (2000) notes that there are four types of cultural identity adjustments during sojourn that affect an individual's reentry processes: subtractive, additive, affirmative, and intercultural. Subtractive means participants reported a weakened connection with home culture while abroad, and additive refers to a strengthened connection with host country. Affirmative refers to a strengthened connection with home country, and intercultural (or global) refers to a broadening of one's intercultural worldview. Cox (2004) presents alternative, but related, types of intercultural identity formation during international sojourn: home-favored, host-favored, integrated, and disintegrated. This empirical investigation of missionaries returning home from 44 countries showed that those in the home-favored and integrated categories reported easier reentry than those in the host-favored and disintegrated categories. Both interpretations suggest that perceptions of cultural identity change while an individual is living in a host culture, and this affects the reentry adjustment process. The Cognitive lens allows for exploration cultural connectedness, how changes in worldview impact

the returnees' perceptions and attitudes of their home cultures, and how their newfound beliefs or values impact sense of belonging.

**Behavioral aspects.** The third category within reentry theory examines the behavioral adjustments during the processes of expatriation and repatriation. Cultural behaviors are learned and adjust based on cultural norms. This aspect of reentry was derived from Culture Learning Theory (Furnham & Bochner, 1986) and focuses on the internalization of behavioral norms and how those norms may be forgotten or replaced during an extended period of time in a host culture. Upon returning to home culture, individuals may have to relearn social skills appropriate to the sociocultural environment. Brabant, Palmer, and Gramling (1990) and Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) found that success in adjustment in initial expatriation influences success in reentry adjustment as individuals have already learned acculturative coping strategies. Selmer, Ebrahimi, and Li pose the unanswered question of whether or not adopted behavior should be discarded upon reentry or if integration could possibly form bicultural behavioral norms (2000). The Behavioral lens can explore how changes in habits, routines, customs, and cultural behavioral norms impact reentry.

For this study, my theoretical framework incorporates the above categories of reentry theory: 1) the Affective lens focuses on complex feelings and emotions, 2) the Cognitive lens explores cultural identity, and 3) the Behavioral lens looks at actions and habits. These lenses are used to understand how changes made while studying abroad impact adjustment and re-acculturation to home country. Specifically, how do these changes impact one's sense of self and cultural belonging? This study uses the three-pronged framework to examine, from a psychological and sociocultural perspective, the lived experiences of students who had spent ten months in a J-1 cultural exchange program in the United States and then subsequently returned to



their home countries. This study specifically explores the reentry transition experience and the relationship between reentry and a person's perception of his or her identity and sense of belonging. As explained further in the methods section, reentry adjustment theory was used to guide interview questions and subsequent data analysis, specifically in terms of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to returning home from a cultural exchange/study abroad experience.

### **Literature Review**

There is a growing body of literature along the themes of international education and reentry experiences; however, the bulk of the studies are of American or Western European students who have participated in study abroad programs. Traditionally, international students who have studied temporarily in the United States and then returned home have been a difficult population to study due to logistics such as geographic location, time, expense, and access. However, with technological advances, those barriers no longer prevent researchers from exploring the unique lived experiences of the aforementioned population.

Despite improved technological access decreasing barriers in communication, the body of research remains largely centered in Western experiences of re-acculturation upon returning to developed nations/economies. Thus, there are very few peer-reviewed published studies centered in the experiences in re-acculturation upon returning to developing nations/economies, as shown in Szkudlarek's (2010) extensive review of reentry literature. There are numerous studies of American students who have returned from study abroad and service learning opportunities, and while some of the implications can be generalizable to international students returning home, the experiences of American students are not comparable to the experiences of

J-1 cultural exchange students as the former J-1 international students in this research returned to developing countries. One can infer that experiences of an American who has spent ten months in Ghana, for example, and his or her experiences with reentry to the U.S will not reflect the experiences and perceptions of a Ghanaian who has spent ten months in the United States. This differential can be attributed to power dynamics as the United States is a dominant culture and Ghana is a non-dominant culture, also known as a minority culture, in terms of global economic and political power (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002). In addition to economic and political oppression, issues including but not limited to war, poverty, gender discrimination, religious law, caste systems, and the restrictions of personal rights and freedoms will inevitably exacerbate re-acclimation difficulties upon return to developing nations (Kiem, 2009; Knaus, 2018; Lulat, 2005).

The U.S. government's interest in providing funding for cultural exchange programs is partially embedded in Cold War contexts (Western Capitalism versus Soviet Socialism), and the discourses around developing or underdeveloped countries are often accompanied by biases and implications that these countries are behind in development, rather than acknowledging how and why global systems of inequality exist. The terms "developed and developing" in reference to nations is a problematic label as it seems to echo the "colonizer and colonized" relationship (Simon & St-Pierre, 2000). However, the terminology "developed", "developing", and "underdeveloped" tends to be the language of these discourses until more accurate terms can be adopted.

When applying a postcolonial lens, it is apparent that modern colonization of nations is propagated through Western dominance in systems such as education, health care, media, and religion, to name a few, all of which idealize Western identity. Western ideology attributes

economic inequality as the fault of those who are economically oppressed, rather than the history of imperialism and vastly unequal global distributions of wealth (“Critical Race and Postcolonial Theory”, 2016). According to Nair:

[Postcolonialism] challenges the Marxist perspective that class struggle is at the root of historical change – instead demonstrating how *race* shapes history. Analyses that focus only on class fail to consider how the identification of the ‘Third World’ (a term developed during the Cold War to describe those states unaligned to the United States or the Soviet Union) as ‘backward’, ‘primitive’ or ‘non-rational’ are linked to persistent economic marginalization (2017).

In addition to class and race, gender plays an important role in postcolonial inequities, especially for women of color. Women of color from developing nations endure tri-fold oppression due to social status and lack of economic opportunity, societal constraints and expectations for women, and both global and domestic systems of racial inequality (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002). Kopsick notes that the language around privilege, oppression, marginalization, colonization, imperialism, and Western/Global North centrism is lacking in international education and policy (2017), which supports the argument that the globalization of education is linked to neocolonialism and cultural imperialism.

In the following section, I situate four relevant domains of reentry literature to highlight the importance of examining student experiences returning home to lower to middle income countries: 1) foci and variables in the body of reentry literature, 2) psychological and sociological challenges to reentry, and 3) current interest in cultural reentry, and 4) notable studies on which to model this research.

### **Themes of Focus and Related Variables in Reentry Literature**

Szkudlarek (2010) attempted a meta-analysis on reentry literature but found the academic documentation to be fragmented and incomplete, so she compiled the varied works into a descriptive literature review. She found that the majority of research is focused on corporate repatriates in relation to reported work difficulties. She hypothesized that this is due to the financial benefits and potential profit losses during employees' reentry adjustments. The second most researched group, besides corporate repatriates, is international students, followed by missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, children raised within two or more culturally diverse settings, and returning migrants. There is very little research on other groups such as returning asylum seekers, diplomats, or journalists, for example. Szkudlarek (2010) emphasized the need to more diversified reentry research and suggested "attention should be directed at cross-disciplinary studies incorporating psychological, cultural, and socio-political aspects of reentry" (p. 12).

Many studies have focused on characteristics and variables among sojourners such as gender, age, religion, and socioeconomic status. First, Brabant et al. (1990) did an empirical study of former international students who had returned to home countries outside of the United States. They posited that gender was the most significant variable when predicting reentry difficulties as women more often reported problems and noticed changes. Gama and Pedersen (1977) described the challenges women faced as they tried to live up to their relatives' expectations of their traditional gender roles, and Cox's (2004) study reiterated those findings. Martin and Harrel (2004) called for more research to be devoted to how reentry adjustment is influenced by gender. Age is also a factor in reentry adjustment, and researchers found a positive correlation between age and reentry distress as the older repatriates reported less distress

(Black & Gregersen, 1991; Cox, 2004; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hyder & Lovblad, 2007; Moore, Jones, & Austin, 1987; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991). There is little research in the role of religion in reentry adjustment; however, Brabant et al. wrote of significant problems related to religion with students from the Middle East (1990), and Martin and Harrell (2004) suggested that religious conflicts during reentry could be due to changes in returnees' values and behaviors as a result of newly acquired liberal views such as freedom of/from religion and gender equality. Socioeconomic status has mainly been studied from the perspective of corporate employees, and the research does not suggest a relationship between socioeconomic status and reentry problems. However, Szkudlarek reasoned that the lack of evidence is a symptom of the broader problem throughout research "where empirical explorations are limited to white, middle-class, North American or Western European individuals" (2010).

### **Psychological and Sociological Challenges**

From the literature, it is clear that the extent of difficulty in reentry adjustment is a vast spectrum as some study participants experienced little to no adjustment issues while others reported significant challenges. However, there are emerging themes in the areas of psychological and sociological impacts of reentry. From the psychological perspective, challenges such as depression, anxiety, grief, and alienation are documented in multiple studies (Adler, 1981; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006). For example, Adler found validity in the affective aspects of reverse culture shock; respondents described the initial feelings of joy and high mood ranging from lasting for only an hour to nearly a month, and then the low period lasting up to six month before feeling "average" again (1981). Gaw (2000) noted

that cognitive adjustment issues included alienation due to feelings of not belonging and loneliness due to isolation and difficulty making friends.

Some researchers have noted a correlation between sojourners' expectations and reentry adjustment. MacDonald and Arthur (2003) found that when expectations were met or exceeded, reentry difficulties were minimal, and this claim is supported by Chamove and Soeterik (2006) in their findings that the level of difficulties upon reentry were higher amongst those who had less preparation and understanding of the reentry process, which implies that unrealistic expectations and subsequent expectation violation upon reentry increases the likelihood of psychological challenges in adjustment. Black, Gregersen, and Mendelhall (1992) stated that expectations play a prominent role in a returnee's psychological adjustment, yet the specific challenges of reentry had, at that time, remained unexplored. They also claimed that cognitive preparation prior to reentry could lead to more realistic expectations. That claim was supported by Maybarduk (2008), who found that U.S. Foreign Service spouses who had unrealistic expectations as to the challenges involved in re-acculturation experienced more psychological difficulties during the reentry process.

Conflicting feelings and emotions around cultural identity is a theme in multiple studies (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Uehara, 1986). Shifting worldviews, changes in values and/or cultural practices, combined with psychological challenges impacts a person's sense of cultural belonging. Again, expectations prior to return have a significant impact on cultural readjustment. Gaw (2000) found that study participants who had returned home expecting it to be unchanged became disoriented and struggled to integrate in social settings. Other themes such as feeling misunderstood, alienated, socially isolated, and lonely arose in the research of Raschio (1987),

Rogers and Ward (1993), and Uehara (1986). These feelings impact behavior of individuals in various ways such as avoidance of social interaction and lack of full participation in family, friendship, and community life.

### **Recent Research**

There has been an increased interest in reentry and re-acculturation processes in recent years. In a 2016 study, Presbitero expanded on prior research regarding the role of cultural intelligence (CQ) in mediating the negative impacts during acculturation and re-acculturation among international students. Presbitero's article contains two studies (host and home), which both found that culture shock impacts psychological and sociocultural adaptations; however, CQ lessens the impact of culture shock. Andrianto et al. (2018) studied the influence of job embeddedness as a mediator of the negative effects of reentry. They studied 178 Indonesian returnees from international organizations. The findings showed that perceived professional identity reduced the overall negative impact of reentry challenges. As part of a larger qualitative study, Kelley (2018) explored the change in demographics in international schools and looked at concepts such as cultural homelessness, identity and belonging, and cultural reentry through the voices of third culture kids (TCKs) and their experiences in international schools.

Michelini, Sonnenchein, and King (2019) agree with many researchers and global educators that there is a gap in the research of international students' transitions back to home country, specifically entry or reentry into the job market. The researchers focused on education mobility and occupational reintegration. They used a narrative approach to describe the past research and identify opportunities for future research. Finally, in a 2019 article, Matic and Russell suggest a framework for psychotherapists working with international students preparing

for reentry. The study looks at aspects of identity that are socially stigmatized in home country, specifically physical disability, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, there has been recent research documenting various impacts related to study in the West, but the body of literature is limited in scope and its acknowledgement of oppression-based reentry challenges.

### **Studies of Focus for Research**

There are limited peer-reviewed published studies on which to model this research project (i.e. research that specifically focuses on international students who have studied in the United States and then returned to their home countries). However, the findings of the following four studies will be used as a foundational model. Butcher (2002) studied grief during the reentry experiences of students from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand after studying abroad in New Zealand. Christofi and Thompson (2007) did a phenomenological investigation of students from Cyprus, Russia, Germany, and Liberia who returned to the sojourn country after becoming disillusioned by their reentry experiences in their home country. Pritchard (2011) examined complex internal conflicts during reentry and reintegration of Taiwanese and Sri Lankan students after studying in the United Kingdom, specifically Northern Ireland. Finally, in a 2018 pilot study for doctoral dissertation, Marquis did a phenomenological investigation of reentry experiences of Fulbright scholars returning to North Africa and South Asia.

Butcher (2002) specifically focused on grief as part of the reentry process. He determined that all participants interviewed had experienced grief at specific points. Much of this grief was centered on disenfranchisement due to expectation violation (a disconnection between expectations and reality) in the areas of family relationships and filial piety, friendships



and social relationships, and career and employment opportunities. During reentry, “Returnees noticed changes in their own worldviews when it became apparent that it did not match the worldview of those around them” (p. 362). First, students returned home to find that their worldviews were much different from their parents’ worldviews, which caused conflict especially in the instances where students had changed or added a religious affiliation. It was noted that the concept of filial piety, which is common in Confucian-based societies in East Asia, caused conflict when the expectations of the parents did not align with the expectations of the returnee. Filial piety is an aspect of respect for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors, but that respect also includes the element of obedience. Therefore, although the participants’ worldviews had changed, the cultural norm of filial piety would require submission to the expectations of the elders. Additionally, Butcher describes changes in friendships with those who did not share a similar study abroad experience, but participants expressed that changes in friendships had less significance in terms of grief than the changes in family relationships. Finally, returnees had expectations, some of which were unrealistic, of quickly gaining employment and were disappointed when their expectations did not match the reality of the situation. Butcher suggests methods of preparing for reentry and details the importance of being supported through the process.

Christofi and Thompson (2007) researched the experiences of students who had studied abroad, returned home, and then decided to return to the sojourn country (in their study, seven returned to the United States and one returned to the United Kingdom.). “The experience of returning to the country of one’s sojourn after going home is grounded in the theme of cultural comparison because participants described reentry experiences in the context of comparing the cultures of their home and sojourn countries” (p. 56). Looking at participants’ cultural

comparisons, the researchers defined five bipolar themes from their narrative analysis: conflict vs. peace, reality vs. idealization, freedom vs. restriction, changing vs. static, and comfort vs. discomfort. A composite view of the participants' words was provided in the results section to summarize the feelings of disillusionment with their home countries:

I looked forward to returning to my home country after having lived abroad for several years. However, when I returned, I began to realize things at home had changed or I had changed. I found myself constantly comparing my home culture with the (sojourn) culture and found my home culture lacking in several ways. I was in a state of conflict over wanting to live in my home country, while, at the same time, finding myself unable to continue living there. It was an ambivalent "should" versus "want" conflict. I felt like I should remain in my home country, but I really wanted to go back. The reality of returning home was in stark contrast to the idealized expectations I had for returning home. I remembered the good things about home while forgetting the bad ones. The freedom I began to take for granted where I was living was noticeably absent in my home country, especially the treatment of women in the workplace. Adjustment to cultural change was an issue when I left home and when I returned; the former was expected, the latter was not. (p. 57).

Further results were detailed and defined by direct quotations taken from the interviews of the participants. The study showed that participants spoke of work, social interactions, and relationships as major themes in their reentry experiences and focused on the disconnect between expectations and reality. Being that the participants had returned to the original country of sojourn, the implications from this study were directed at counselors in the United States and the United Kingdom in the area of empathic understanding and active listening. However, the

poignancy of the participants' choice to return to the host culture not only indefinitely implies the inability to adapt upon reentry to their home cultures, but also reflects privilege in having the choice and/or the lack of restrictions barring that choice.

Pritchard (2011) examined the experiences of participants through their retrospective analysis of study abroad in Northern Ireland and connected those experiences to the process of reentry to home country. One of the major themes was the students' disappointment in the disparity between the development of their host and home countries. As one participant stated, "Poverty hits you in the face...in developing society, you are preoccupied with home, family, and hard work to achieve financial status, whereas in a more developed society you have more leisure, can read book, and entertain your friends" (p.103). There were strong negative feelings expressed regarding the lack of infrastructure, a working bureaucracy, and/or methodical systems of law and order in their home countries. The most notable portion of this study was the emergence of complex internal conflicts such as modernism vs. traditionalism and individualism vs. collectivism. The researcher suggests that reentry trauma should be re-conceptualized as more of a sociopolitical issue than an individual one. This is one of the reasons that the reentry experiences of J-1 cultural exchange students, who are from countries in which the United States has a diplomatic interest, should be examined.

In his 2018 dissertation, Marquis chose participants returning to developing countries with vastly different cultural norms than those of the host country (the U.S). He used an interpretive phenomenological approach that incorporated the experiences of both the researcher (himself) and the participants. Marquis focused his research on the lived experience of reentry adjustment of Fulbright FLTA alumni from North Africa and South Asia. He identified four central themes: increased sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, home versus host country

comparisons, critical questioning of home country and culture, and reentry style. The challenges that participants experienced encompassed decreased personal freedom and independence as well as a lack of understanding by peers regarding participants' international experiences.

Participants described emotional processes such as grief, loss, despair, longing, anger, and hope. Additionally, he found that the word "change" was the most frequent word used in expression of personal feelings. Data revealed that participants questioned their decisions to return home as they struggled to readjust to their environments. However, family obligations and a desire to make an impact motivated participants to work toward transferring newfound knowledge, skills, and worldviews to their home countries (Marquis, 2018).

The themes of grief and disenfranchisement caused by expectation violation, cultural comparison and conflicts caused by shifting worldviews, and identity conflicts caused by changes in self-perceptions of identity and cultural belonging are interwoven through these four studies of interest. These themes can provide a foundation for further qualitative research in the area of reentry processes and the impact on self and cultural belonging.

Overall, the reentry literature examined in this review can be used as a foundational model for further research that is more specific to international education, intercultural exchanges, programs designed for soft diplomacy, and international scholarships for students from underdeveloped and developing nations. As an educator, I have, at times, fallen prey to the idealism of international education. However, it is important to be realistic in acknowledging the unintended consequences of significant growth and/or change while studying abroad and how that impacts one's sense of identity and cultural belonging when returning home.

### **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative investigation of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with re-acculturation after a significant experience in a host culture in relation to perceptions of self and social belonging. “Qualitative research properly seeks answers by examining various social settings and the groups or individuals who inhabit these settings” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p.8). The phenomenological nature of study abroad and subsequent reentry requires that the unique experiences of the participants be at the forefront of the research, and for those experiences to be disseminated in authentic form. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) state that qualitative research can be used “to discover, explain and generate ideas/theories about the phenomenon under investigation; [and] to understand and explain social patterns” (2006, p. 49). Therefore, this study used semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions to examine the lived experiences of 8 former J-1 cultural exchange students upon reentry to Bangladesh, Colombia, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, South Africa, and Pakistan, specifically the navigation of and adjustment to reentry shock, also known as reverse culture shock, and its effect on a student’s perceptions of his or her identity and sense of belonging. The findings should inform policy makers, administrators, advisors, and instructors as to the difficulties faced during the reentry adjustment process in order to provide support structures to possibly assuage these difficulties for future students.

### **Research Questions**

I asked two questions that focus on the experiences of former J-1 cultural exchange scholarship recipients. In particular, I wanted to know the psychological and sociological aspects of the reentry experiences and how individuals come to terms with a changing awareness of self-identity and social belonging.

- 1) How do J-1 cultural exchange students returning to developing countries experience the reentry process?
- 2) How do the reentry experiences of J-1 cultural exchange students impact self-perceptions of identity and cultural belonging?

### **Study Design**

This study was based upon videoconferencing interviews as the primary form of data collection. Berg and Lune (2012) categorize videoconferencing as synchronous environments “insofar as they provide a mechanism for a back-and-forth exchange of questions and answers” and “a researcher can delve as deeply as he or she chooses into an area either structured into the interview schedule or arising spontaneously in the course of the interview exchange” (p. 133). Although observable body language is limited to the upper body or above the shoulders, video will show non-verbal cues including gestures and facial expressions. According to Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014), the advantages of using new technologies such as Skype for data collection in qualitative research outweigh the disadvantages.

The Skype interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to just over an hour, were recorded using installed software on the computer and voice recording on a smartphone for back up. In three cases, the researcher was able to meet with participants for interviews that were approximately one hour long. In one case, the researcher first held a Skype interview, but the participant expressed discomfort and stress with that mode of communication, so a week later, the researcher was able to travel to her and spend seven hours of casual social interaction, though this was not recorded. Then, based on the conversations, the researcher sent an email with specific questions, to which the participant replied with focused responses about her reentry

experiences. One participant was not able to videoconference or meet in person, so the data was collected through written communications. After the initial interviews, clarifying or deepening data was gathered by communicating through social networking systems, email, and phone calls. The timeframe for data collection was September of 2018-March 2019

The structure of the interviews was semi-standardized with unstandardized aspects in order to provide the opportunity to relate the interview to the research questions while at the same time leaving room to digress into unplanned areas if needed. This also reduced the formality of the interview, which created an atmosphere more conducive to the open, honest, deep responses needed in this research study. The role of the researcher was to inspire self-reflection and self-identification of the psychological and sociological experiences of the participants and effectively elicit rich descriptions. Berg and Lune (2012) note that in a semi-standardized (semi-structured) interview, questions can be reordered, wording can be flexible, level of language can be adjusted, and the interviewer may add or delete questions between participants (p. 109). The interview questions in this study differ based on each participant and his or her perceptions of identity and belonging through the reentry experience. In order to streamline the interview process and tailor to each participant, I requested that all participants answer open-ended questions via a survey website. The answers were used as a starting point for more in-depth questioning during the interview. Survey questions are listed in Appendix A.

### **Participants: Purposeful Sampling**

A suburban college in the northwestern part of the United States participated in the Northwest College Program (NCP) grant as part of a consortium to host cohorts of J-1 visa international students each academic year. NCP was an academic and cultural program

sponsored by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. The participants for this study are former NCP students who spent 10 months in the United States and immediately returned to their home countries.

It is important to understand some of the details of the NCP experience in order to situate the reentry experiences of these individuals. Students arrived in August and spent the first two weeks with a “friendship” host family. Each family built and maintained relationships with one or more students throughout the ten months that the students were in the United States. Host families often took the students places on weekends, celebrated holidays, and provided support on various levels. During the first four weeks, the students participated in an 80-hour pre-academic course prior to registering for college classes. After the first two weeks, students moved to fully furnished apartments with one or two others, but each individual had a private room. They were given a bi-weekly stipend for food and incidentals. Many students were able to budget their stipends to save for travel and experiences during school breaks. The students had access to social and academic supports through the college, but there was also a full-time advisor who was on call for problems or difficulties and who also coordinated activities and adventures. The program design was meant to support linguistic, academic, social, and cultural adjustment issues.

### **Human Subjects Protections**

The main ethical issue involved in this study was the protection of participants’ identities and the confidentiality of the findings. With such a specific group, careful considerations were made to protect the identity of each individual, both in the host country and in their home country. Participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study and signed a consent



form. Participation was voluntary, and participants were reassured that they had the right to withdraw at any time. The participants provided informed consent regarding recording and transcribing of the interviews. Precautions were taken to secure the data, including a nondisclosure agreement with the transcription service, password-protected access to the computer on which the data is gathered and stored, security of external hard-drive where data is backed up, and security of physical materials such as printed transcripts. The researcher did not discuss the data with other participants or anyone affiliated NCP. All written documents use pseudonyms and all other markers of the participants' identities are obfuscated, including the host college and specific international program.

### **Limitations**

Although the participants represent a range of nationalities, the sample size is smaller than originally planned. The researcher sent out 28 invitations to participate in the study via email and social networking systems. Of the 28, 13 were female and 15 were male. Out of the 28, only 16 individuals expressed interest. That number narrowed even further to 10 when the requirement of a signed consent form was reiterated. This was due in part by the expectation of printing, signing, scanning, and then emailing the document. Additionally, there were time lapses in the researcher's communications with participants, which may have led to a lack of motivation amongst those who had initially agreed to the study. Finally, there were two participants who sent the signed consent form and filled out the survey, but then did not have either the time or technological resources for video conferencing.

Initially, the researcher had planned a comparative look at two cohorts: one group after six months home and the other after a year and a half home. Due to the researcher's pause in the

study timeline, the study was refocused on self-reflections of the participants three to five years after returning home from study abroad. In retrospect, the study would have benefited from more female participants; however, involvement in the study had to remain completely voluntary, and only four of the initial 13 female invitees expressed interest. That number then fell to three due to logistical complications.

### **Procedural Analyses**

The recorded interviews were transcribed prior to analysis. I coded the transcripts for each individual and categorized based on emergent psychological, sociocultural, and behavioral themes. Written responses obtained before and after the interviews were included in the analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) identified three approaches to qualitative analysis: interpretive, social anthropological, and collaborative social research. I employed an interpretive approach, which means that how the data was interpreted depended on the theoretical orientation of the researcher (Berg & Lune, 2012). I also used the themes identified in the reentry literature as a comparison in the analysis. The value in interpretive analysis is that it not only provides a descriptive account of participants' responses but also incorporates the application of theories, inferences, and implications.

When quoting participants, written and verbal, I have left their responses in their original forms. Brackets and ellipses are used for clarity, flow, and cohesion. Participants in this study use non-standard forms of English, and all quotes reflect how the participants voiced their own experiences. English is a non-native language for all of the participants, and while fluency varies, all participants' communicative use of the language is robust and effective.

This study is intended to uncover the experiences of students returning home after a State Department J-1 cultural exchange scholarship. The research questions are focused on reentry re-acculturation after a significant sojourn and the impact on a person's sense of identity and cultural belonging. Due to the phenomenological nature of reentry, interpretive qualitative methods were used in the interviews, analyses, and communication of the results.

### Study Participants

Table 1

*Study Participants*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Years Since Reentry</u>
Amal	Pakistan	Female	5
Arnaud	Ivory Coast	Male	4
Javier	Colombia	Male	4
Koudou	Ivory Coast	Male	3
Nyong	Indonesia	Male	3
Olerato	South Africa	Female	3
Putra	Indonesia	Male	4
Rihaa	Bangladesh	Female	3

Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

The following autobiographical information was gathered through participants self-publications on the NCP website, the researcher's prior knowledge of the participants, and social media profiles.

Amal was 26 years old when she took part in the NCP cultural exchange. She had attended university away from home, but had moved back to live with her parents, as is the cultural norm in Pakistan. She comes from a middle class family and was raised in a liberal sect of Islam. She had worked in sales, administration, and education prior to study abroad. She chose to apply for the J-1 scholarship to polish her English skills, learn about the American

education system, and experience diverse communities, cultures, and countries. She studied mainly business courses when in the United States. She had the goal of returning home to start a business and contribute to her community.

Arnaud was 25 when he came to the United States through the cultural exchange program. Prior to study abroad, Arnaud had numerous leadership and entrepreneurial experiences. He had graduated four years earlier in Ivory Coast with a degree in finance. He had the most travel experience of his cohort due to his experiences in young African leadership delegations. While in the United States, he studied business administration, and shortly after returning home, he moved to India for about ten months for a job opportunity. Arnaud is a motivated self-starter and remains active in his entrepreneurship.

Javier was 21 when he left Colombia to study abroad. He is the middle child and has nine siblings. Interestingly, he was the only Black child among his white siblings. He had a near death experience when he was young, which changed his outlook on life and gave him the confidence to take more risks. He is strong in his faith as a Seventh Day Adventist and considers his time abroad as spiritual and emotional growth that strengthened this relationship with God. The cultural exchange scholarship was his opportunity to overcome his fears and gain confidence, in addition to improving his English and studying business. He said, "I was born not to fit in, but to stand out."

Koudou was 29 years old when he accepted the NCP cultural exchange scholarship. He is from the Bété ethnic group and lived with his family in the Ivory Coast prior to studying abroad. He had two years of collegiate education, but no work experience as he was waiting to be assigned to a post. His interest was in Early Childhood Education and had the opportunity to

study those courses in the United States. Upon returning to the Ivory Coast, he was placed in marriage and family counseling as his government job post.

Nyoung was 27 when he joined the NCP for study abroad. He studied digital media and communications, and he got a job in public relations when he returned to North Sulawesi, Indonesia. He is the youngest of his siblings, but he was the only unmarried child of his siblings, so upon returning home, he took more responsibility for his aging parents.

Olerato is from Pretoria, South Africa and was 23 when she came to the United States. She had university experience, but no degree at that time. Her parents were not supportive of her educational goals, so she had to navigate higher education independently. She comes from an economically challenged past, which led her to pursue her dreams regardless of familial support. As a young Black South African woman, it was her perseverance, strong will, and faith in God that helped her pave her own way. During NCP, she studied business administration, marketing, and public relations. She completed her degree after returning home.

Putra was 29 when he arrived in the United States. He was a married, Muslim man with two dependents. He left Java, Indonesia in the hopes of gaining knowledge and skills while at the same time experiencing new people and cultures. He did not have college experience prior to NCP. He had been working in quality assurance for a digital game company. In the United States, he focused his coursework in graphic design.

Rihaa was 21 when she came to the United States. She studied in all-girls' private schools throughout her childhood and into university. Her family is liberal and very supportive of her goals and dreams. She considered her participation in NCP as a gap year from university, but she expressed dissatisfaction upon returning because she felt that she was a year behind. She

also struggled with depression and homesickness halfway through her study abroad and expressed anger with herself for feeling that way. She studied media and film while in the United States.

### **Self-Reflections by the Researcher**

I could paint a lovely picture of my field of expertise and profession. This picture might include examples of smiling, happy children in Korea, military spouses learning citizenship and English as a Second Language, and hundreds of international students proudly displaying certificates of completion from their Academic English Program all with their American teacher who helped them along the way. My picture would be the epitome of multiculturalism with diverse in age, culture, religion, race, and nationality. However, that is just the surface. Beneath the surface, you would see that every aspect of my career is laced with English language hegemony and cultural domination as I primarily cater to the privileged, providing opportunities for greater financial and social advancement to those who can invest the time and pay the tuition.

I teach English language acquisition. When I ask my students why they are here in the United States learning English, the first answer is usually the same: to get a good job and make money in the future. I am torn because I love my work; it is my passion. However, I question that maybe all I am doing is contributing to the system that values some languages, cultures, and countries and marginalizes others. There is an obvious language hierarchy in the world and fluent American English (in its standard academic form) is at the top, highly coveted, yet elusive for those without wealth.

I teach at colleges, piecing together an income as an adjunct instructor. International students choose higher education in the United States to obtain degrees and certificates that will

help them get ahead. While I aim to provide them with the codes of power to be successful in navigating the college and university experience, I also participate in the system that provides a path for the rich to get richer and the poor to remain oppressed. Acquisition of English language is acquisition of English thought, logic, culture, values, and behaviors. I propagate English hegemony. Conversely, I also see my position as an opportunity for social justice. I incorporate issues of race, religion, class, gender, and sexuality throughout my curriculum. My goal is to create awareness of said issues, have courageous conversations, and foster an atmosphere where intercultural learning can thrive.

For five consecutive years, I had the privilege of teaching the 80-hour pre-academic course for the NCP grant recipients. Unlike other courses that I have taught, there were no explicit outcomes or curriculum. I was told to prepare them for college, so I designed the course according to my mission, vision, and values of international education. The importance of international relationships and intercultural understanding has always been important, but in these modern times of growth, changing governments, globalization, internationalization, and environmental crisis, interconnectedness with other countries and cultures rises to the forefront as a dire need. This is what I kept in mind with designing curriculum for the NCP Pre-Academic Course. My methodologies were Critical Pedagogy and Social Constructivism, and therefore as the instructor, I was the facilitator of intercultural exchange. The themes focused on specific markers of identity: language, nationality, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, socio-economic status, religion, and politics. There were also explorations of arts and entertainment, environmentalism, and mental health.

Although the NCP grant has been defunded, I continue my investment in intercultural understanding through this doctoral research. I am dedicated to life-long learning and inform my

practice in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, empowerment, and the transformative power of intercultural dialog.

### **Findings**

In alignment with prior reentry research, the three-pronged theoretical framework of affective, cognitive, and behavioral adjustments was central in participants' experiences. I have chosen to organize the findings by major themes. The first theme explores how newly acquired habits impact readjustment when returning to home country. The second looks at the participants' expectations and the effect of others' expectations of them. The change in participants' worldviews and the impact on their perceptions of social identity is the third theme. Finally, one participant experienced the three themes, but she also endured extensive trauma when returning home. I have chosen for her story to stand-alone. The headings for this section are as follows: 1) Changes in Habits and Behaviors, 2) High Expectations, 3) Changes in Worldview and Social Identity, and 4) A Traumatic Reentry: Amal's Story.

#### **Changes in Habits and Behaviors**

While participating in NCP, students were socialized that being on time for classes, meetings, and excursions was imperative. Two participants expressed that their changes in habits pushed against the relaxed cultural norms of punctuality. For example, in Indonesia being late to work is not a detriment. Nyong expressed that being late is accepted or even expected. "Being on time, it's really hard to apply here. Because everyone is late here...I just try to maintain to be on time, and people just doing some jokes to me, oh, here's the American guy, he always came on time into the office. So, I'm the first one came in the office every day." Koudou similarly spoke of others' reactions to his punctuality. "They call me Mr. America because I



think I made some changes in my way of doing things, like being on time in appointment. I used to be late every time...[now] some of them say 'you always want to be like the American. Here we in Africa...so leave us with your new habits.'" While this may be seen as gentle ribbing in some contexts, it could also be perceived as rejection in others. Koudou's tone reflected both amusement and irritation.

Koudou stated that he has become a more "law-abiding citizen". He respects rules and expects others to as well. He mentioned laws about alcohol, cigarettes, and public urination in the Ivory Coast:

In my country, you can buy alcohol, you can buy cigarette at 12 o'clock. It doesn't matter. There is a law against that, but no one [applies it]. No one respect it. So, a boy of 12 years, 15 years can go to a supermarket and buy alcohol. It's okay. There is another thing. You can urinate on the street. It's okay. No one will tell you anything...You can do it where you want. No one would care. And now, these are some new habits that I got. I cannot do it anymore.

Another participant gave the example of traffic laws. Putra immediately noticed this on his way home from the airport and at first found it humorous. However, humor quickly turned to irritation:

When I came up from the airport, then I met this kind of situation...then I laugh with this traffic because I didn't meet this kind of situation for a year, and then I laugh during the way back home...But by the second month, and then three months, I didn't find it funny anymore because it started to annoy me...For example, people cross the street suddenly without seeing the situation...We don't use the zebra cross [crosswalk]. We have zebra

cross, but we don't use it because we don't obey the rule...We don't obey traffic light if there's no police around there. We don't obey...That's why it's funny because I think before I went to the United States, it's okay for me as long as this situation don't make me crash or something like that.

Putra went on to say that he now had "a new ideal" and that's why the fact that others did not follow rules and laws was one of the most challenging parts of adjusting to life back home. He reminisced about his time abroad stating, "I miss the people, especially, the people that, like I said, people always obey the rule. They always get in the line." Then with a deep sigh he said, "If we have a chance to cut the line, we cut the line."

Nyong had also gotten used to the societal standards in the United States and expressed surprise and disappointment at poor customer service:

I asked about where they sell the SIM card for my phone, because I lost my SIM card when I was in the United States, and suddenly I felt the difference between the way the customer service served the customer...suddenly I'm really shocked, okay, so this is Indonesia, so I have to relax, so I have to accept this. So, again, I asked the lady and she still is like ignore me...but that is the moment that I realize, well, something like really a culture shock for me.

In another participant's experience, before spending time abroad, Rihaa had never noticed poor customer service because it is so common. However, this is one of the first things she noticed upon returning home:

In America, we used to have good customer service. For example, when you go to a restaurant, or when you're paying phone bill or something like that. In Bangladesh,

everyone is so rushed and everything is so in a hurry...when you go to a market, when you ask someone how much is this, they're going to respond to you in a very rude way.

That was something, you know, struck me.

Rihaa also mentioned that she is much more likely to express her dissatisfaction with servers or drivers than she was in the past. She claimed that she will shout "Wait!" or "Be patient!" at drivers who are not following traffic laws, but more significantly, her new confidence to "stand up and say something...respond to the situation" extends to other interactions in public spaces such as gender harassment on public transportation. She said that she is willing to speak out about it now, whereas in the past, she was socialized to just accept it.

There was one participant, Arnaud, who described how his family assumed that he had changed his habits and behavior and treated him differently, and that made him feel like a "stranger" in his own home:

When I got back from the US, my family bought the whole [case] of mineral water because they believed that I couldn't drink tap water anymore. That was funny for me because even [in the US], I was drinking tap water. So, just the belief that something has changed, people start treating you differently because they feel like you've arrived, become successful because you got the chance to be in the US, and that is a dream for most of the people...They believed that if I was going back to normal water, I might be sick...[but] I wanted to go back the way I wanted. I didn't want to be treated differently, but people could not treat me the same.

While Arnaud appreciated the thoughtfulness of his family, he did not want to be treated as though he was now too good for tap water. In this instance, his family expected that he had changed, but he was uncomfortable with differential treatment.

The participants had to make adjustments in habits and behaviors while in the United States which they then adopted. While this may seem like a minor adjustment, it is significant because, in many cases, these are daily reminders of changes in self and struggles to fit in. Largely, participants expressed frustrations in others' cultural habits and behaviors that did not meet their new ideals, but the discomfort that they felt appeared to be primarily when others noticed and commented on participants' new habits and behaviors.

### **High Expectations**

A shared experience among several participants was that others had high expectations about the amount of knowledge and skills gained over a relatively short time studying abroad. Putra said that friends and family demand more from him now. He gave the example that even a small task will inspire judgment and comments. "They always demand, 'Okay so you came from United States. You came from a big country, [so] you should know more than this.'... 'You came from United States and [all] you can do is this?' They are a little bit disappointed." He went on to say that if he makes mistakes, especially in English, others question if he had really studied in the US. Also from Indonesia, Nyong focused on others' expectations at work:

People are going to expect more from you because they know you are a graduate from [the US]. They are expecting a lot of things from you, that you can do anything that they're expecting...They are expecting a high standard...and that worries me, that worries

me a lot, and I don't want they judge my work like this is the work from the people that graduate from the United States?

Nyong explained that regardless of the length of time in the United States or level of degree obtained, people will judge by the one standard. For example, the NCP was not a degree-granting program. While a student may have taken a class in digital design, this is not the same as earning a degree in the subject. This expectation of mastery put pressure on Nyong to meet those standards:

I tried to fulfill the standard...people were expecting more from me, but the problem with me is I get tired of facing that problem, of facing that worries. I have to maintain the standard that they want...I have a responsibility in my office, [and] I have a responsibility to the [NCP]...I have to do something for my community...I have to do all in because I don't want [to let others down]. I have to do my responsibility.

He went on to say that others misunderstand what he learned in the United States and the purpose of his program. In his experience, the program was mainly cultural, but others believe that it was mainly academic, and this misunderstanding led him to feel pressured to have more knowledge and skills.

Before returning to Colombia, Javier was already worried about what his family and friends might expect of him, but he looked forward to bringing the gifts he had bought to his family; however, he was quickly disappointed by their reactions:

Something that knocked me down was to know what my family was expecting from me. They did not care all the souvenirs I bought them, they were all expecting me to come

back with a lot of money in my bank account, not knowing that I was not making money there, but studying and getting to know myself more.

Javier felt hurt and offended that his family focused on money more than his learning and growth.

He was discouraged that money was their top priority for him:

I felt like I had let them down. I knew things supposed to be different once I got back, but not just right away, I was not making money, or become the rich, so my family thought that, or well, that was I got based on the way they started treating me after they knew I did not bring money.

Over time, he came to understand why his family had reacted with unrealistic expectations of financial gain:

About this idea I must say that it is still stuck in some of my relatives' and friends' minds. Before, it used to hurt me, but as the time has passed, I've learned that it is ok if they think like that, I should not take it personal. Also, when I started to figure out why they think that way, I came to the conclusion that it was mainly because of our culture, we have this idea that whoever gets out of town and goes to the big city or somewhere else like me who went to another country, he or she is going to do so much better and return well-off, and sometimes it is like that, but after some years, not after a month or ten like in my case. So, even though we are truly hard working people, some have not understood yet what it really means to work hard to achieve our goal of living a comfortable life.

According to his family and friends, the opportunity that Javier had to study in the US should have resulted in immediate financial success. Javier seemingly shares that expectation for himself, though he is realistic about the timeframe, "I believe that I deserve more than what I

have, and it is not that I do not like my life, it is just that I think I can live this life and work hard to make it better. I know can make more money if I take more risk and invest my money wisely, and as the result of that, I can live in better conditions.”

While the male participants in this study felt the expectation to have more skills, knowledge, success, and financial gain deriving from their experiences abroad, Olerato returned to South Africa to find social and familial pressure to settle down, get married, and start a family:

As a woman living in a Black society, success is believed to be married and having kids. That is what is expected from us and the pressure is too much. Should you not have that, you are labeled as a failure. Our generation is forever changing, and women are empowered now and again. Getting married shouldn't be forced upon us; it should be a choice.

Olerato moved back to the family home, and because she had not found a job yet, she was given the responsibility of the domestic work. As other adults left for work each day, she stayed home and took care of the house and children:

My experience when it comes to that is painful, because at some point I felt like I was not living my reality but rather living for people. I believe in growth and serving, and when I am not living my life to the fullest I believe as wasted time. I have two siblings and I love them very much, [but] living with my family meant all the household chaos, taking care of the kids was now mine. In the morning, I had a schedule as to how to go about the responsibility of taking care of my siblings and cleaning the house. That meant neglecting my own dreams. I must say that was depressing. When you have goals of your own, and

no support and nobody believes in you nor your potentials, it can be very discouraging at some point.

Being a strong independent woman, Olerato was able to maintain her motivation to achieve her goals. Her optimism and faith pushed her through the difficult times:

I tell myself that people may fail you but never fail yourself. I kept pushing and pushing and praying for better days. I am a woman who wants to make something of her life. I want to grow and live to my full potential. I have dreams and goals that need to be realized. I am grateful for all that I went through [because] it led to maturity, and me knowing what is it that I don't want in my life...I really don't blame them for the treatment, pressure they put on me. I believe that is what they believe is right. [It's] suppression that we woman are not meant to live our dreams and are subjected to be housewives.

Olerato had other expectations for herself, however. She had assumed that with her qualifications and experience that she would find a job or at least an internship. She eventually got her "dream job" with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), but soon found out that they did not have the funds to pay her. "It was painful. Just when you think that something is going right in your life. And I had to go back home due to that. The fact that I couldn't pay my rent and I was broke." Olerato searched for work and went on interviews for nearly ten months and nothing came of it. She also tried to start her own catering company, but when her business partner dropped out, that attempt failed. During the interview, Olerato had tears streaming down her face as she recalled the feelings of loss and failure. "Here I am an unemployed graduate, with my qualifications!"



Olerato also explained that one reason why finding work was so difficult was because others saw her as a threat due to her study abroad experience:

I expected, due to the fact that I had acquired international education, that some things would be welcome to me. But in fact, it was a threat to a lot of companies...When I got interviewed and asked about my experience in the USA, I felt that counted for me not getting the job because they were threatened as far as their jobs were involved, that I would take their job...There was a time I asked for a job, which I was qualified, but some guy was like 'oh god, you want to take our jobs' and stuff like that. Because some of them, they don't have educational background.

After three years of challenges and barriers to professional success in South Africa, Olerato got an entry-level hospitality job through a recruiting agency and left home to work at a resort in the western United States. "Your dreams are your dreams; they don't need to make sense to anyone else...Our families are the ones that should help us when we need support and guidance, sad for me I did not have that, [but I] am happy and proud of myself that I rely on my own strength."

As the participants described, expectations went both ways. In some cases, participants experienced expectation violation, or a disconnection between what they had prepared for and the reality of life when returning to home culture. Conversely, there were also the expectations of others, which were difficult, or impossible, to meet.

### **Changing Worldview and Social Identity**

This section includes how changes in worldview while abroad impacts reentry experiences. That change in worldview did not diminish pride and feelings of connectedness to

home country and culture. A subtheme emerged about perceptions of cultural gender norms, gender roles, and human rights regardless of gender or sexual identity.

All of the participants expressed their pride for their countries and cultures; for example, Rihaa voiced her love for her national identity and a greater appreciation of her culture, even aspects that she had previously judged or criticized:

This started the moment I got down from the plane and I was going home. We have just been on the streets, garbage is spilling out, you can smell it, it's stinking, dogs are eating the garbage...It's a very common thing. I specifically remember, my father came to pick me up from the airport, and I rolled down the window, and I was taking the stink because I missed the stink so much, of the streets and garbage. I'm like, you know this is embarrassing for me, but this is my country and I missed it so much...it feels comforting and feels like home... I used to get irritated by silly traditions of silly habits of Bangladeshi culture...this is my country, this is the habit of the people and this is my people [and it] differs from other people's tradition...Sometimes the most embarrassing culture of my country might be better than someone else's best culture.

Rihaa's home-culture preferences may have been intensified by homesickness while she was away. The experience that she described when driving home from the airport with her father indicated a sense of relief to be home, perhaps relieved of the burden of fitting in with the host culture. Another example Rihaa shared was that prior to her experiences abroad, she had never participated in cultural programs in Bangladesh, such as singing or dancing. When she was in the United States, she realized how important it was to perform and show her culture:

I was never a singer, never a dancer. I was big in size, that's why dancing never fit. Skinny girls always dance...Then I came back to Bangladesh and I began performing. For example, I became an MC for a few programs in my University [and I] performed for the first time...I realized that it doesn't matter if I look bad or not, if it's bad or not, but it's important that I push for and represent something.

Rihaa summed up by saying that she has a stronger sense of cultural and national identity now and "embraces every bit of nationalism".

Others spoke of national identity as well. As Putra explained, "I realized my country is special and my country has so many things I can be proud of and show off. For example, its nature, its food, my culture, especially culture because we have many special cultures." Arnaud's friends and family had expected him to adopt American culture and were happily surprised to learn that he had developed a greater appreciation for his Ivorian culture:

Because when you are in your country, there are things that you see that you usually don't value like our traditional dresses or our dishes or the fact that we eat natural food every day, not processed food. We have people taking care of us at home, or mostly our sisters. There are things that you don't value, maybe the green, the vegetation...Oh that has value. I thought there was no value to that, but now I see there is value.

Arnaud said that his family had expected to see him dressed in western clothes or even change his accent, "but I got back the same...I mean, I was more fluent in English, but it wasn't a huge difference. It was mostly just the same person with different perspectives."

Some participants revealed how their experiences abroad had broadened their worldviews and increased how they valued diversity. As Javier stated:

What truly changed was the interaction with people from other backgrounds. I believe I am now an open-minded man, and it has helped me to accept that even though we come from complete different cultures and places, we all experience the exact same things in life that make us act the way we do. What I want to say is that before I used to judge others just because they were “different”, or if I see someone speaking in English I thought he or she was a “Gringo/a”, or that every Asian person was Chinese, and so on, but it is different now.

Javier went on to say that he has also changed his view of himself and now feels that “there is a piece of me that belongs to the world, so I do not think that I am only Colombian, but African, Indian, Japanese, American, and so on.” Nyong also shared that he had changed his mind set about diversity:

I have a really good mindset now about my view of the world, and that’s really an asset for me, because I have that kind of understanding...when I’m back home here, I try to explain [to friends] about the acceptance of cultures. Maybe they don’t get it...So, that’s the big challenge that I face...It’s not about make a classification or something, it’s about to accept all the differences. It’s a richness...It’s about to merge all the differences and then consider it a richness.

A subtheme that emerged, related to changing worldviews, was perspectives on gender relations. Rihaa discussed how it feels to return to a culture where women do not have equal rights and privileges to men. “I can recognize it. Maybe previously I wouldn’t have recognized that type of thing in regular life. If somebody’s talking to me, I can sense the sexism pretty well.” She went on to say that she became more acutely aware of how she needed to dress, or cover up,

in public spaces. “You cannot walk out of your home wearing western clothes. You can, but people will stare at you or catcall you. You have to carry a scarf...especially cover your chest area. You have to be very careful about your surroundings and how you’re sitting.” She recognizes that the societal expectations for her gender limits career opportunities:

In terms of work, there are few works that prefer women or a female graduate to do rather than a male graduate...There’s this difference if the work involves field work or going to villages...My concern was, why do you think that I can’t do it? They were like, no, they are a conservative community, they might not want to talk to you...Of course it hurts right, just to see that there is a difference, or people perceive that you cannot do the specific job, [but] there’s nothing we can do...Coming back, it was difficult to readjust.

While readjustment was difficult, Rihaa comes from a liberal family who supported her through her education. She had attended all-girls school, college, and university. After her year abroad, she went back to university to finish her degree. She realized that having that structure and educational goal made her reentry process relatively smooth. She has since graduated and gained employment with an International NGO.

Nyong’s aforementioned change of mindset also extends to his perspectives on gender roles and equality in Indonesia:

My perspective about gender identity changed. I’ve learned also about gender equality during my stay in U.S. In my country, gender equality in the workplace is still an issue. Women still considered weak and will not be able to hold an important position in certain organization...Men think that women are weak, and people still consider that women are below men and this is not something that you can change, because this is the culture of

the country...But there's all this support here [recently] for a woman to make a good career...I think Indonesia is growing with that. Now, we have a lot of female leaders...but the women are still [considered] below the men...Even if laws or policy change, or education opportunities, there's still a mentality that takes longer to change.

Nyong now has a female boss for the first time, so he expressed that he sees women making progress in the fight for equal rights and opportunities, especially in education and work. However, he acknowledged that the majority societal mentality is to consider women as subordinate to men. This demonstrates a heightened criticism of home culture.

Arnaud similarly had a significant change in his views of women in society. He said that this is one of the ways that he had changed: the realization that women do not have to stay home. "They can work, do their career, and find a way to balance work and home." However, that takes changes in men's roles as well:

[In the US], I saw men cooking, which is very rare at home. We know how to cook, but we usually don't. If we cook, that's a special day, maybe Mother's Day. But [in the US], I saw women cooking, men cooking, depending on who is home first, and kids even cooking...When I went back home, it changed my perception of how it should be. The mother is usually the one staying home, just because she has to take care of the kids and everybody. But, I've seen people successfully doing it in the US without sacrificing their career.

Arnaud found himself sharing his new perspective with others, but people in his country have the cultural belief that by staying home, a woman creates stability for her family. He had many

discussions about how to blend the ideas and make it efficient for women who want to work but also keep the family together:

I think it's more than a choice. It's a necessity because life is becoming more expensive. We have a new generation. My generation, we are more culturally diverse...Women my age now are more in school than before, so they don't want to just go to school for 20 years and then go and stay home with all their education...Men also don't want to have that pressure of them to be the income provider...I mean, I witnessed the burden that was on my father, having only one income for the entire family with many kids was very difficult. So, I think if women can go in the workplace, just from an economic standpoint is very good for both men and women, because both of them will have enough time to be present.

He elaborated that equal rights for women would improve the quality of life for both men and women. In Ivorian culture, women are the caregivers and men are the disciplinarians. He stated that this creates an imbalance for the children. Men having more of a role in taking care of the home and children could improve the next generation. "In my perfect world, women and men will be equal...They will both work, but also, they will keep their culture, their sense of family, and the position of men and women in the family. Because, in our culture, men are considered the head of the family, and women are considered the foundation of the family. We need both."

Koudou returned to the Ivory Coast with the expectation that he would be placed in an early childhood education post, but instead was assigned to do social work and family counseling. He explained that social work, early childhood education, and special needs education have the same required training and classes. Therefore, he was stepping into a role for which he was

qualified, yet inexperienced. He described some of the challenges he faced when advising couples:

It was like I was preaching in vain because no one wants to change...I was trying to convince people to change their behavior...I was trying to make them law-abiding citizens first, and to respect women. They used to fight with women. They used to beat women. And if you are living in a rural place, there is [no consequence]. You can do it, no one will care about it. You can beat your wife and no one will talk. So, I have been posted in a rural zone...and I try to talk with them in order for them to change their behavior.

When asked if he had these strong feelings about women's rights before his study abroad, Koudou responded, "No, I didn't have this feeling before. I'm from the Ivory Coast, so it was my culture too. I was like them." He then described how he has also changed his views of the LGBTQ community:

Being an international student in the United States changed my view of [sexual] identity and gender. Because in the US, you can see members of LGBT, and there is no problem. But in my country, there are some places where people will not accept it. They may be able to kill you. In the city, it's okay. They could accept it because most [people] in the city went to school. They are more educated. But in the rural place, no, they cannot accept it.

Koudou described a case when a transgender woman was beaten and jailed in her village. Koudou went to the village to educate about gender identity, but they would not accept his counseling. Koudou continues his work in family counseling, but has also started a small NGO



with his friends. He wants to give back to his community and create opportunities for underprivileged children to go to school.

In the ten months spent abroad with an emphasis on intercultural learning, participants had significant changes in worldviews. In cases of cultural identity, participants expressed pride in their cultures and nationalities. However, they also identified areas that were less than satisfactory, such as women's rights, within their own cultures. While abroad, participants developed a more critical lens in regards to human rights and how sexism impacts the lives of women from how they must dress, to where they can go in public, to education and work opportunities. Additionally, a change in worldview allowed participants to see the negative impact of sexism on societal development. Finally, Koudou's change in worldview gave him the confidence to intervene and advocate for LGBT rights, even though he may have felt alone in that fight.

### **A Traumatic Reentry: Amal's Story**

Amal experienced reentry shock immediately upon arrival in Pakistan. As she was walking through the airport, men told her that she was not allowed to go out by herself. They told her that because it was early morning and still dark outside, she must wait for a family member to pick her up. She protested and wanted to call a taxi, but the workers insisted that she sit and wait. Because she was speaking Urdu, she was treated differently than foreign travelers in the airport and was expected to remember her role as a Pakistani woman. She was dressed modestly, yet they stared at her and commented that her family would not be pleased by her appearance. She called her cousin to pick her up:

[In the past,] I never dressed like Western dress ever. So my cousin was looking at me and he said, “Uh, you should have changed your dress.” You know that was a stressful moment... And then I'm like, why do people think that way? I [assumed] it was fine, I have a scarf on [around my shoulders] so everything is good. And he's like, “you put the scarf on your head!” And then we got home and I had to change my dress the first thing. That is why I'm like, why do I have to come back, oh my god, I'm like, why. And it was hot in there, oh my god! [I thought] why do I have to come back? I wish I could go back right now or I wish I didn't have to come back. I was really stressed. I didn't talk to anybody that moment. That was the stressful, distraught moment. Why I came back from the U.S.? I mean as soon as you step on the ground at the airport and people are just staring at you because of your dressing and you are like open-minded now so you want to talk to everybody. But they're staring at you. It's a different culture, but I was already changed in 10 months or 11 months. When I got home it was really hard for me to believe the fact that I am in Pakistan. I came back from U.S. so I have to change everything, my dress and my mind and I have to be careful now whom I talk to [and what I talk about]. So that was the airport scene.

Amal stayed at her uncle's house in Islamabad for a few days, worrying and feeling stressed and frustrated. She said she didn't talk to anyone; she didn't even call her mother. After four days, her mother called to ask if she was happy to be home, Amal answered that she did not know why she had come back. Her mother answered with, “I know.” Her mother knew that coming home would be difficult for Amal and worried about her transition.

Amal made arrangements to travel to her home community, which was a minimum 25-hour journey by car. She booked a six-passenger vehicle with other travelers and began the trip

home. She was traveling through the remote areas, underdeveloped and potentially dangerous.

They reached a roadblock:

So on the way, after 10-hour drive, so it's like mountainous area. They are extreme Muslims, like really bad ones. Like, in the capital city people are still open and they're still okay. But these are like, they never went to school and they dress up like the Taliban get-up you see on the pictures and online so those kind of people. It's just like the extreme mind. So when you drive by on the road, mountainous area and those villages and those kind of people are there. And they block the road there. So I was already stressed and then we were there for six hours on the road. They were demanding something from the government so it was really bad. And you can't even go out there. I mean if you get out of that vehicle, then those people...So we were there for like, seven, eight hours. There are no restrooms...you can't even use your phone because no battery there and we were just stuck right there. And you can't trust those people; they have weapons and everything.

The continued threat of terrorism is ubiquitous in Pakistan. Women are often easy targets for extremists, and Amal's passport stamp would have been evidence of her collusion with those who have been denounced as infidels. The punishment for a woman could be rape, beating, enslavement, or death. However, there was no option other than to stay quiet, wait, and hope that she would not have to face violence.

One of the other passengers in Amal's hired car was a pregnant woman, and although her husband was traveling with her, she asked Amal to accompany her outside the car to find a place to relieve herself. Amal clarified that, culturally, it would be shameful for the woman's husband

to help her in that way. At first Amal protested out of fear, but the woman insisted that it was an emergency.

We got out there and then I took her aside where people cannot see...I was standing right there and then one of the extreme person, oh they were pretty bad, I don't want to think about them. And [if] he were to touch you and assault you, and it's dark outside, you can't even tell people. [In] the society we have, that's the truth. Even though people are educated, going to school and universities and everything, if something happens like assault or sexual assault, something happens to a female, a lady, and if she talks, then she's the bad person. They're like no, she did something wrong, and that's why it happened to her or she's making up. So she's the bad person in the society and no one will marry her. That's the truth there.

Neither Amal nor the pregnant woman was sexually assaulted; however, misogyny is the reality for women in Pakistani society, and Amal spoke of this instance as a matter of fact, not an isolated instance. They continued to wait.

The threat of violence was real and tangible in during the eight hours at the roadblock. Amal explained that a few years prior, in the same rural area, extremists had come down from the mountains and stopped the busses and slaughtered the passengers. Her aunt was there, but escaped with her life and has not traveled since:

She said they stopped like three, four busses and they burnt all of them. People were in them, like living people. They called every Shia Muslim, they take them out from the bus and they check their ID. You know, back home, you can tell if someone is Sunni or Shia, like some names, you can tell. And they were like, "Oh you are Shia, go ahead just

kill him” and allahu akbar...So, with knives and big rocks, they slaughtered them. If you see that video, it is online, on Youtube, maybe they took it off. My aunt says that she is not traveling anymore; she was there.

A dozen people survived because they lied and said that they were Sunni Muslims. Amal explained that she did not think these men at the roadblock were the terrorists her aunt had encountered, but she knew the possibility was there.

With the memory of her aunt’s experience, Amal was worried that the armed men might check her passport and see her American visa:

It would be violence...they would take me and question me. They don’t trust Americans because...you know, that place is very different from Pakistani people. I know Pakistan. There’s extreme people, blasphemy, killing Christians and other religions. They do and they are extreme.

She pretended that she had never been in the United States, praying that they could just pass the roadblock without any trouble. She pulled her scarf tighter and tighter, telling herself, “we live right here, that’s it. I never had been to the U.S.” She hoped that the government would give the men what they had demanded. After seven or eight hours, they were allowed to pass. The long drive home ensued.

Before she could go to her parents’ house, she stopped to see her extended family. She had brought them some gifts and stayed there for a day. She only had one Pakistani dress that she had been wearing while traveling from Islamabad, so she changed into a long dress that she had bought in the US. She was told that her clothes were unacceptable and given a dress to change into. “See, everything is so stressful and people are traumatizing you right there, forcing

you to do these things. And I'm like, I'm all covered up so why do I have to change...but no my cousins are not happy so just change it." The next day, Amal arrived in her hometown:

I was all crying and then I was already stressed because of...I don't know. It was like culture shock. If you go from one place to another place, you know the whole thing changes. It's just something inside your heart is so dark. You feel darkness in your heart and your body. Like even in my soul...And then I cried for like two hours.

Amal went on to speak of how happy and relieved her mother was that she had come back; however, Amal did not share that sentiment. She was unable to leave the house for a week due to depression. She did not want to go out and talk to people, so she isolated herself. Even after weeks of adjustment, she could not bring herself to live as she used to do, such as spending time with friends and family, volunteering, and teaching:

Things I used to do, I never did them. So, that's the truth. My mom is like you should go to community health care. We have community center where you do volunteers and help kids and everything. And I'm like, just give me some time...So, it's really religious activities that she's talking about...and I'm like I'll go to school, but I'm not going to religious center.

Amal expressed gratitude that her mother and father continued to support her through all her adjustment challenges. Unfortunately, her parents were facing challenges of their own as Amal's father had gotten into an accident and had critical brain surgery during the time Amal was away. He had lost half of his memory, but slowly got it back. As the eldest daughter, it is culturally Amal's responsibility to care for her parents, and she felt guilty that she was not around during his accident and recovery.

While abroad, Amal had explored her beliefs and values. She comes from a liberal sect of Islam and has always been curious about other religions. “I do believe in all religions that there is just one god. That what is was since I was a kid. That’s what we believe...We believe in humanity. Humanity is the first priority; religion is in your heart. That’s how we grew up.” She believed that she had the right to explore, experience, and question while she was in the United States and did not think there would be repercussions for doing so:

When I was a kid, [even] in the Holy Quran, we talk about Jesus. That he is a healer, so he had miracles. He used to raise men from the dead. He used to heal people. And I was always questioning why Mohammad didn’t have all these miracles, why Jesus has...but Mohammad questions are blasphemy. That’s the truth back home. You cannot say anything about Mohammad, even if you just want justification, you want some explanations...If you say so, you committed blasphemy. So, I couldn’t question, but I always had questions in my mind. When we were kids in school, we have Islamic Studies, where they teach us about Islam and how Mohammad spread Islam everywhere. They teach us proudly that Mohammad killed all other religious people, like Hindus. And then he broke their idols, so that was like jihad. We were kids so [we believed] Mohammad was God. So we were brainwashed, like that’s the truth. We have to accept it. They taught us that Hindu is the worst religion. It is not the worst religion, but when we were kids, in our mind this is the fact, and we have to accept it as truth. In school, they teach us according to Islamic curriculum, but [the leader of our sect] teaches us about humanity.

Amal clarified that she wanted to use the word “brainwashed” rather than “indoctrinated” because much of the teachings she had experienced as a youth were not according to doctrine.

For example, from as early as she could remember, she was taught that other religions were evil, especially Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism. Also, she clarified that her community practices a more liberal form of Islam, and the brainwashing comes from government propaganda and government controlled education.

In the United States, Amal met Christians and Hindus and decided to go to both church and temple with friends and host family members:

When I started to go to church with my host family and my roommate, I liked it because that's just the worshiping and they don't talk about other religions. You worship God and talk about respect and humanity and love. [I wondered] why back home you all have a bad image in your mind that Christianity is a sin. I went to temple too [with Indian friends] and they started teaching good stuff too...and it opened up my mind, like this is not what you learn back home, so I was happy. That it's just humanity, and every religion talks about humanity and respect and love for each other.

Amal regularly attended church and felt welcomed and supported. She described that after a few visits, as well as discussions with her roommate, she felt something different than what she had in the past. She felt comforted. "I started to feel the Holy Spirit, like worshiping made me cry and pray to God from the depth of my heart. That is something which I had never felt before."

Amal wanted to share her discoveries with her family, friends and community, but she quickly learned that she was not allowed to talk about it. "I had to shut my mouth everywhere." Her family and community are liberal, but government controls public education, and it is strictly forbidden to question Islamic teachings. Prior to her study abroad, Amal had taught physical



sciences and math at the local public school. She had been a good teacher and the children loved her, so her mom suggested going back to teaching to help her adjust:

I went back to school then, and they expect you to talk about your experiences in the U.S. What did you do? What did you learn? Because back home, Americans are the richest people in this universe, like every American is rich and they have everything...maybe you brought a lot of money? I started teaching, and I talked about Christianity. I was trying to put in their minds that not all these religions are bad. It's just the way we are, to worship and pray to God, different ways to pray to God. So religion is just a title; everybody is good.

She also showed the children pictures of her experiences at a Hindu temple. In the picture, she had the traditional red bindi on her forehead. The children told their parents, and the parents called Amal's mom:

When my mom got complaints, I told her that I was just talking about church because they were asking about my experiences. I was trying to talk about other religions, and that I went to a Hindu temple. I was just showing them pictures...and my mom was getting threats...so in our society, it's not acceptable, so I might get killed if I still talk about Christianity and all. My mom said, "You need to shut your mouth now."

After the threats and complaints, Amal's mother discussed the option of returning to the United States because she was worried that Amal may get hurt. There was also potential danger for other family members as it is a small community where everyone knows each other. Both Amal and her mother recognized that it was not safe for Amal to share her experiences, and staying in Pakistan meant that she had to suppress and hide her thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. Amal's mother

also worried about her other daughters. She worried that their safety and/or future marriage opportunities could be at risk. Amal and her mother decided to try applying for a student visa for Amal, even though she was not eligible for another visa to the United States for two years:

One of my uncles, luckily, he sponsored me. He's a very rich guy, so he sponsored me. He said that once I get back, have a stable life, after I finish my studies, I can pay him back. He's a good, rich businessman. So I applied for a visa. My dad had a medical checkup, so we went to the capital city. We didn't tell anybody that we are leaving. I applied for a visa, and I got it, like in a day...I think that the lady [who] was interviewing me, she's still thinking that I'm a student at [Northwest College] and I was just here on vacation, so she's like, "Oh, your visa has been issued so you can just pick up your passport in five days." That was a lucky one...I didn't tell anybody. I didn't need anybody. And I just left.

Amal came back to the United States on a two-year student visa. She applied for asylum, which was granted, and completed the process of becoming a permanent resident. For over a year, her uncle continued to support her, but members of the community found out he was sending money to a Christian girl and threatened his daughters. Amal did not want to accept money from him anymore after finding out that he was putting his family at risk. Her father gave her his retirement money to pay the bills until she received a work permit, which was a financial hardship for her family. They maintain contact, but it is secretive, and they only talk about Amal with a few family members.

To conclude the interview, Amal had some final thoughts about sexism and women's autonomy:

In actuality, if a man had the same experience here, he wouldn't have been questioned at the airport. He wouldn't be judged for his style. He wouldn't be afraid to speak about his experiences. He wouldn't have had an intense reaction from people...People would be like, "Oh he's a guy. He came from the U.S. so he's just sharing experiences and we trust him." But for a lady, there is gender discrimination I've experienced, and I have suffered...Some cousins don't like me because of the way I did all these things. Because in my family, everyone had arranged marriages...I was engaged once and I broke up before I got the scholarship...I'm the bad girl because I did break up. That's why they are not happy...[But] my parents don't force me to do what they want me to do...My mom and dad are, they are angels. They say, "Whenever you want to marry, whomever you want to marry. Whether he's Christian, Muslim or whoever he is, we just want a good person. Just you like him, he likes you, and you are happy. That's all we want."

At the time of this interview, Amal felt that she finally had the freedom to make her own decisions about her identity, beliefs, and values. However, this freedom came with heartbreaking sacrifice. She expressed that she will never be able to travel to Pakistan to see her parents. Considering her father's health and the family's financial situation, it is unlikely that they can travel to the United States to visit her.

To conclude, the experiences of reentry were unique to each individual participant, but some commonalities arose. Participants had grown accustomed to habits, behaviors, and social norms that made life in the United States easier, such as traffic laws, customer service, and punctuality, and expressed discomfort and frustration at the inconveniences and daily irritations in their home countries. Also, the cognitive distance between expectations and reality exacerbated reentry challenges. In some cases, society expected too much of the returnees in the

form of acquired skills, knowledge, success, and financial gain. Other participants expected more from society in the form of job opportunities, social acceptance, and familial support. Participants had fundamental changes in worldviews, which led to a heightened awareness of the oppression of women in a world where sexism is the norm. Finally, the trauma that Amal endured and her subsequent emigration illustrate the severe repercussions that can come from shifts in identity that conflict with home culture, especially when that culture strictly enforces a religious patriarchy.

### **Discussion**

There are four significant takeaways that I would like to discuss in this section: 1) sexism and the patriarchy 2) the burden of expectations, 3) gender as both a key factor in reentry adjustment and change of worldview, and 4) the unintended consequences of change.

Sexism played a major role in the reentry experiences of the participants in this study, and the global patriarchal systems are oppressive to all genders. The societal pressure to conform to gender roles conflicts with the values of individuals who are striving for equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for women and girls. All of the participants in this study reported an increased awareness of gender discrimination and the need for developing societies to view women as equal to men; however, the system benefits men, so women shoulder the burden of impetus for social change. The patriarchy is maintained by the suppression of women through lack of opportunities for education and work, lack of familial and societal support of women's decision-making autonomy, heightened social control of women's dress, movement, and choices, and the always present threat of harassment, abuse, and rape. Women are forced into servitude and only valued when they demonstrate submission to men's needs and wants. The patriarchy is

a global systemic problem, and while men benefit from it in the areas of personal freedom, financial gain, and social standing, it also suppresses men by reinforcing toxic masculinity and reducing men to the stereotypical providers and disciplinarians. These institutional, societal, and internalized gender role expectations impede a person's ability to reach her or his human potential.

During the 10 months that the participants were in the United States, I would argue that they were sheltered from the ideological, societal, and institutional systems of oppression. While sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, and religious persecution have shaped the development of the United States and continue to permeate the culture, the participants in this study were in a position of privilege, relatively, as the program was designed to make them feel enthusiastically welcomed, financially secure, and valued for their multicultural identities. Many saw the United States as the ideal example of freedom and equality, and adopted that lens to view their own countries and cultures.

Most of the participants expressed that they had gained a host-favored view of, or a preference for, certain American habits, behaviors and social norms. They wished that others in their home culture would follow their lead in the areas of punctuality and following rules and laws in particular. In my interpretation, this "new ideal" may be unrealistic. Participants were frustrated that others rejected their ideas, often pushing back with negative comments regarding the participants' Americanization. Change cannot be forced on those who do not see the value of such changes. For example, participants expressed irritation with traffic and other public behaviors. However, in order to achieve such ideals, regulations must be enforced for the public to follow them. In the United States, traffic policing and enforcements lead to a disproportionate burden on the poor. The participants did not own cars, nor did they drive while in the United

States, so the perception of traffic law and order is based on minimal experience as passengers shielded from the encumbrance of car ownership. The “new ideal” may not be as ideal as one might think when taking into account the requirement for more enforcement and less freedom.

A repeated theme throughout the data was that others expected too much of the male participants when they returned home. This ranged from expectations of bringing home money to expectations of acquired knowledge and skills. Participants expressed worry, guilt, and stress if they could not meet what family, coworkers, or bosses expected of them. From previous studies, I had believed that it was likely that participants would feel disenfranchised due to unrealistic expectations of themselves, but my research did not fully support that idea. In contrast, even though the men in this study felt the pressure of financial responsibility, they expressed confidence in both current and future career opportunities. While study abroad did not immediately lead to financial gain, it also did not impede the likelihood of a positive impact on their socioeconomic status in the long term.

Participants experienced significant changes in worldview and became more liberal in their views towards women’s rights and equality. However, it is unclear how or if those new views are actionable. Rihaa claimed that she felt empowered to stand up to men in public if she sees sexual harassment, but it would not be safe for her to do so. In fact, a recent violent incident in Bangladesh made international news (Sabbir, 2019) and demonstrates the dangers women face when publicly defying gender oppression. On April 10, 2019, 19-year-old Nusrat Jahan Rafi was doused with kerosene and set on fire on the rooftop of her school in Bangladesh. This was in response to her accusations that her male teacher sexually harassed her and her subsequent refusal to withdraw the accusations. While Bangladesh has a female Prime Minister, this does not compensate for the misogyny in society or what men will do to silence, punish, and control

women. I use this incident as an example of the dangers of speaking out against sexual harassment or assault. In the Ivory Coast, Koudou stood up for a transgender woman to a community that not only rejected her but also punished her severely for her identity, but he gave up after the community rejected him. In this case, even male privilege could not stand up to the misconceived societal beliefs in the in-born gender binary and the suppression of those who do not conform. In both Pakistan and South Africa, family and members of the community expected Amal and Olerato to immediately conform back to the gender role requirements of society, regardless of their knowledge, skills, and goals. Family and community did not value them for their potential contributions to society, unless those contributions were limited to marriage, children, and domestic duties. While both Amal and Olerato both feel that marriage, children, and family are future goals, they want it to be on their own terms and by their own design, not what family and community impose upon them.

It is a complication with adjustment when one's liberal viewpoints conflict with his or her community or family. For example, Olerato believed that she could easily get a job with her qualifications and experience, but as a woman, those opportunities were not available to her. Her family also did not support her educational and career goals, and ultimately, she felt rejected by them. Being a Black woman in South Africa, Olerato was pushing against cultural norms, but she was also trapped in a system of racism and classism stemming from colonization and Apartheid. She felt that studying in the United States would give her an advantage to job opportunities, but there is growing unemployment among college and university graduates in South Africa, and her identity as a young Black woman from a lower socioeconomic status impeded her opportunities for employment. Therefore, she ultimately made the decision to leave South Africa, taking with her all of the youthful vibrancy, unique skills and talents, and

progressive ideas that she could have contributed to her home society if she had been respected and valued.

Finally, there are unintended consequences of choosing to study in the United States due to political and religious conflicts. In Amal's case, these consequences were not minor. When traveling through the remote area, she feared that men would rape or murder her if they saw her passport. When the United States is seen as the enemy, it is risky to go to the United States and experience the culture, and the result could be vigilante punishments in order to suppress a Westernized viewpoint. This history of U.S. policy with Pakistan is complex, including but not limited to military interventions that kill civilians and terrorize communities, which intensifies anger and resentment. Additionally, while Amal had explored religion through a critical lens prior to study abroad, she did not anticipate that her changes in beliefs could lead to societal rejection and endangerment of her family. In fact, leaving her country was her only option if she wanted to live her truth and keep her family safe.

In sum, the reentry experiences of the participants reflect how both global and domestic systems of oppression limit freedom, choice, and opportunity. The dominance of Western ideals impacts the expectations of self and others and complicates the goal of healthy multiculturalism. Sexism, enforced by patriarchal institutions, devalues the contributions of women in society thus limiting opportunities. Families and communities socially enforce gender role requirements, and this internalized sexism creates the belief that compliance with gender roles is a requirement for social stability. Women who push back on systems of inequality are ostracized, preventing them from promoting social change. There may be serious consequences for both men and women who have adopted multicultural values, especially when those views are seen as a threat to the patriarchy or other institutions of power and dominance.



## Recommendations

The question remains about how this and other studies on reentry experiences should inform policy makers and cultural scholarship organizers. Careful consideration is necessary regarding the possible negative impacts for individuals accepting cultural exchange scholarships. Scholarship recipients need to be aware, prior to study abroad, about how changes in self and identity could impact them upon return. This should be a significant part of the application, selection, orientation, and reentry procedures. Advisors who have had reentry experiences could counsel students preparing to leave for study abroad. Participants reported that there was limited support during their reentry adjustment. Supports mainly include alumni connections, meetings, and/or events, but there is a clear need for psychological support in the forms of individual counseling and support groups. Logistically, this may seem cumbersome; however, videoconferencing and the use of social media can be used to connect returnees with mental health professionals and groups. Also, while psychological supports may ease the emotional transition, there is an even greater need for financial opportunities. Networking, according to the participants of this study, was limited to meeting with other cultural exchange scholars to share information, but the connections to job opportunities were nonexistent for those who were not returning to an already established or semi-established career. There is an existing cultural exchange scholar infrastructure, and administrators can broaden that to connect with business and industry sectors to provide opportunities for returnees. Here are five practical suggestions for international reentry supports:

1. Being that J-1 scholarships are highly coveted, the applicant pool is vast. I suggest that some of the practices by the Fulbright Foundation be adopted. I have taken part in several selection committees, and the top applications have one thing in common: a long-

term plan that draws from their current knowledge and experiences, includes proposals for community engagement while abroad, and explicitly explains how those experiences will lead to future plans for education and work. The committee prioritizes those whose long-term plans are realistic and actionable. In the cases of J-1 applicants, returning home to work or university creates support structures and manages the transition more effectively.

2. It is important for selection committees and program coordinators in home countries to clearly understand and communicate the unintended consequences of study abroad, especially to selected applicants who are underprivileged, marginalized, stigmatized, or oppressed in their countries. Advice should include strategies on how to develop their long-term plans and implement them upon return.
3. While studying abroad, cultural exchange scholars should attend workshops that aid in the development of their long-term action plans. These workshops should be focused on how to translate their knowledge and experiences to their home communities.
4. Reentry workshops are common with cohort-based J-1 scholarships. I would like to see improvements in these workshops by moving away from the general U-Curve or W-Curve models to a deeper and more critical look at re-acculturation processes. In these workshops, returnees will develop tailored strategies to mediate reentry adjustments based on advice by sociocultural psychologists.
5. Based on the fact that there is a two-year home residency requirement, it is imperative that support continues for those two years. I propose two areas that the U.S. Department of State should provide funding for after the cultural exchange: financial stability and mental health. Financial security in the form of work opportunities will contribute to

easing the stress of reentry. Returnees should be able to apply for cost-of-living stipends if financial opportunities are unavailable in their home communities. This would be a temporary stipend while the returnee seeks long-term financial solutions. In addition to funding stipends, the U.S. should employ mental health professions to maintain advising and counseling for the entirety of the two-year residency requirement.

Regarding J-1 policy, the two-year residency requirement can be a burden for returnees. The stated goal of cultural exchange is for students to contribute to their communities after returning home. However, if opportunities are lacking within their communities, former students can feel trapped by this requirement as it prevents them from seeking other educational and work possibilities. As demonstrated by Olerato's experience, two years of rejection and, in her words, "failure", took a toll, not only financially, but emotionally as well. In Amal's case, staying in her community in Pakistan would have been dangerous for her and her family, and it was by luck or the incompetence of the embassy worker that she was able to leave after only six months home. While the two-year requirement sounds positive in theory, in reality, it can stagnate an individual's career trajectory and cause harm to her or his well-being. However, the U.S. goals of soft diplomacy through cultural exchange is in direct conflict to my suggestion, so until there is a paradigm shift, there must be more support during those two years.

Finally, while not directly related to reentry transitions, I would like to propose that curriculum and instruction move away from the globalization and internationalization models, which tend to include relevant global themes (generally related to commerce and trade), but do not address power and privilege. There must be a focus on critical pedagogy, including how educational institutions have been complicit in colonization of minds and assimilation of dominant Western ideals. Applying critical pedagogy in the classroom means to create an

atmosphere where students have the opportunities to explore identity, privilege, and oppression in order to gain understanding of global systemic inequalities. It is through depth of understanding that students move towards the praxis necessary for change. If we continue to avoid the difficult conversations and limit diverse perspectives, we are not only slowing down our ability to process the past injustices, identify present inequities, and create a more harmonious future, but we are also denying our students the opportunity to construct awareness and understanding about oppression in an authentic, relevant, and meaningful way.

### **Conclusion**

Changing geopolitical relationships has created a need for a fresh look at reentry experiences of international students in the United States, especially those returning to developing countries or countries with vastly different values and cultural norms. The participants in this study had significant changes while studying abroad, and these changes impacted sense of self and belonging. Participants had not anticipated the unrealistic expectations of others, nor were they prepared for the rejection of their new worldviews, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Additional support structures are needed in order to improve the current system and aid in the transition of returning J-1 cultural exchange scholars. In some cases, newly acquired beliefs and attitudes can cause students to be rejected by families and communities, and in more extreme instances, identity-based oppression can endanger the lives of returnees. Women returning to home cultures where they have unequal rights and opportunities must be the focus of further research. We must rethink the goals of international education. I believe international education should lead a global movement towards a more equal and equitable world and equip students with knowledge and skills they need to push back against global and local systems of oppression. The support should not end when international students

leave institutions of higher learning; if we truly believe in the transformative power of intercultural exchange and its diplomatic benefits, we must maintain connectedness, in collaboration with other nations, after students return home.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

- Describe your experiences returning home.
- Describe the different thoughts, feelings, and emotions that you experienced while adjusting over the past year.
- What were the most challenging parts of adjusting to life back home?
- How did returning home impact your sense of racial or ethnic identity?
- How did returning home impact your sense of gender identity?
- How did returning home impact your sense of national identity?
- How did returning home impact your sense of social or economic status?
- How did returning home impact your sense of religious identity?
- Add any additional comments about the process of adjusting to home country. This might include examples of work, school, family, friendships, partnerships, group affiliations, societal expectations, and political orientation.