

Introduction

The experience of being foreign is as varied as the individuals who undergo it and the settings in which it occurs. It is nevertheless informed by a coherent pattern that sets it apart from other kinds of experience. That this is so is reflected in the increasing attention devoted to the experience by social scientists since 1960, when the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg coined the term "culture shock" (Oberg). In more recent years, entire book-length studies have been devoted to elucidating various aspects of the experience (Condon and Yousef; Hall; Brislin). Long before 1960, however, the experience had been explored at length and with great insight and sensitivity in works of fiction by several~ authors of international prominence. Leo Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* (1862), Henry James's *The American* (1877), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* (1954) are but a few examples of what has become an increasing preoccupation with the experience of being foreign by novelists throughout the world. And in one of today's most popular literary genres-science fiction-intelligent speculation as to the nature of the experience constitutes one of the leading themes (Lem; Herbert; LeGuin; Clarke). One of the earliest formulations by a literary figure of precisely what the experience of being foreign consists in can be found in a story by Jack London, first published in 1900 and entitled "In a Far Country". The opening paragraph offers the following account of what a person should expect to confront when undertaking a sojourn in another culture:

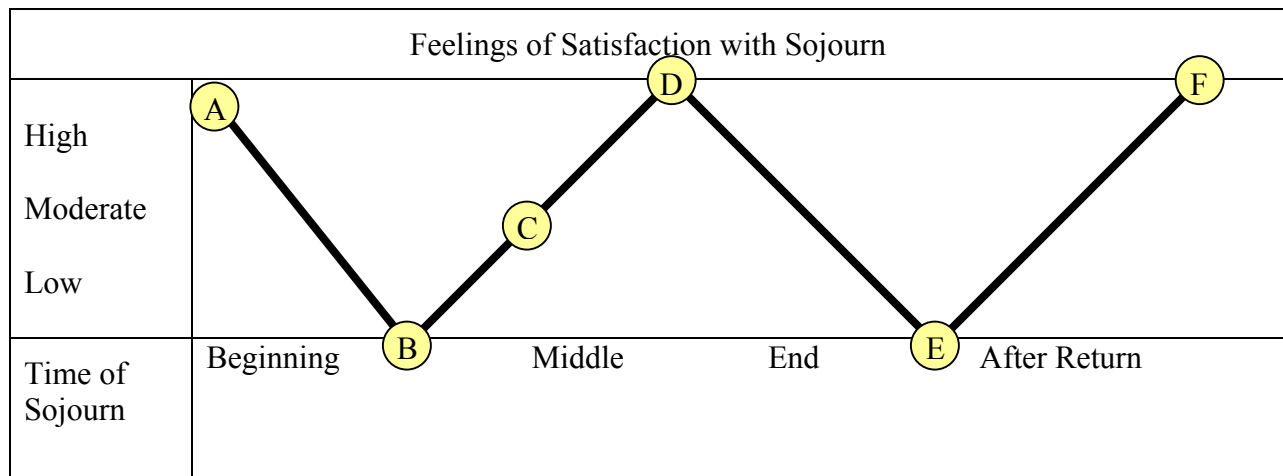
When a man journeys into a far country, he must be prepared to forget many of the things he has learned, and to acquire such customs as are inherent with existence in the new land; he must abandon the old ideals and the old gods, and oftentimes he must reverse the very codes by which his conduct has hitherto been shaped. To those who have the protean faculty of adaptability, the novelty of such change may even be a source of pleasure; but to those who happen to be hardened to the ruts in which they were created, the pressure of the altered environment is unbearable, and they chafe in body and in spirit under the new restrictions which they do not understand. This chafing is bound to act and react, producing divers evils and leading to various misfortunes. It were better for the man who cannot fit himself to the new groove to return to his own country; if he delay too long, he will surely die. (302)

By this account, and others, the experience of being foreign has the potential for working a significant transformation at the deepest level of an individual's sense of being, possibly ending in his destruction. According to Czeslaw Milosz, these forces of transformation are inherent in the experience: they can be resisted but never completely avoided. As Milosz points out,

No matter how strong the attachment to one's native land, one cannot live away from it very long and still resist what is seen everyday-cannot go on complaining of the strangeness of the new language, mores, and institutions, straining sight and sound toward one's lost country. We are nourished by our senses and whether we are aware of it or not, we work constantly at ordering our chaotic perceptions and composing them into harmonious units. Total uprootedness is contrary to our nature, and the human plant once plucked from the ground tries to send its roots

into the ground onto which it is thrown. This is so because we are physical beings; the place we occupy, bounded by the surface of our skin, must be located in space, not in a "nowhere." Just as our hand reaches out and takes a pencil lying on a table, thus establishing a relationship between our body and what is outside it, our imagination extends us, establishing a sensory-visual relationship between us and a street, a town, a district, and a country. In exiles from the eastern part of Europe one often notices a desperate refusal to accept that fact. They try to preserve their homeland as an idea. Space in which they move, yet since it exists only in memory, not strengthened by everyday impressions, it stiffens and is transformed into words that grow more obstinate the more their tangible contents fade away. (Milosz 197)

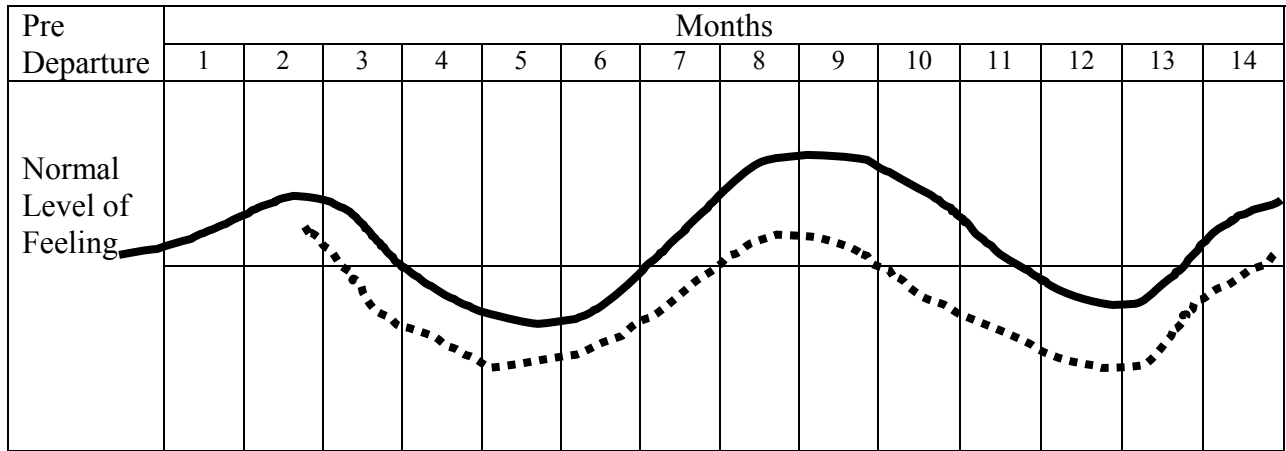
Social scientists and social psychologists have attempted to identify the basic pattern underlying the experience of being foreign. One of the best known of these attempts is Gullahorn and Gullahorn's W-curve.



It represents the adjustment of the sojourner along a temporal dimension. In a very general manner, the sojourner tends to undergo a decline in adjustment shortly after entering a foreign culture, which is followed by a recovery stage with a resultant increase in adjustment; then, on returning home, the sojourner undergoes another decrease in adjustment followed by a second stage of recovery. (Brein and David 216)

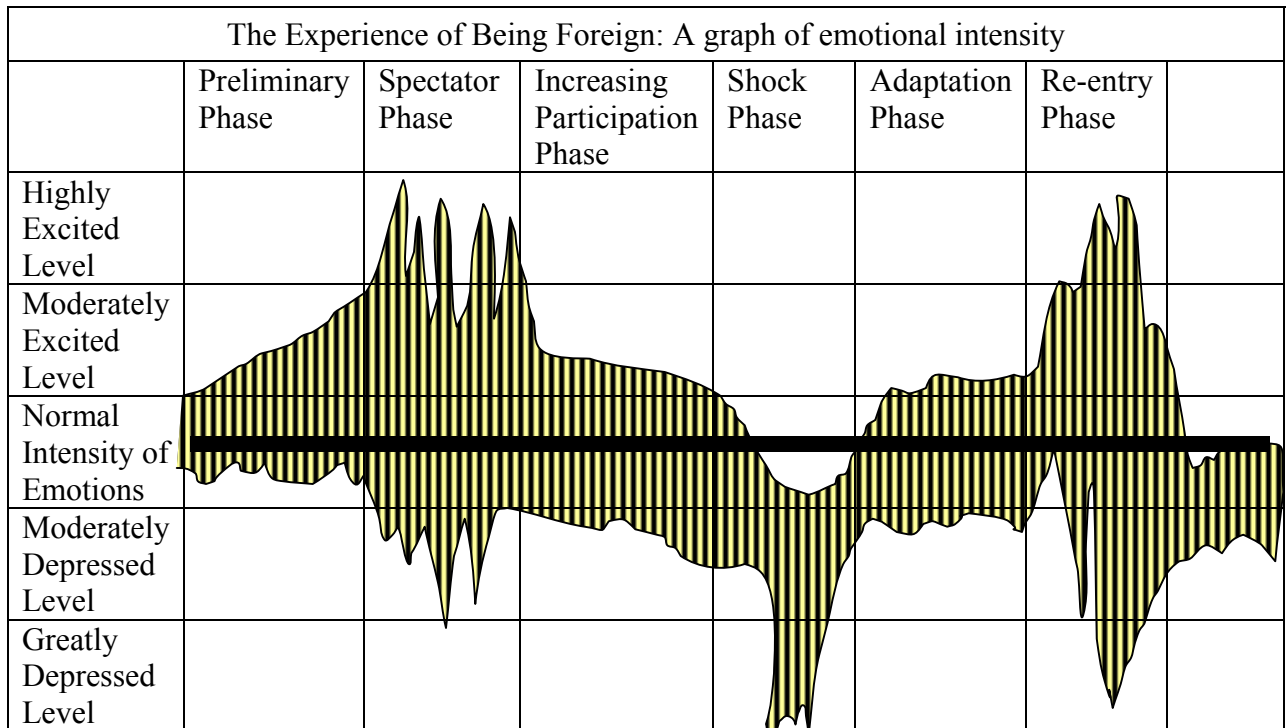
A modification of the W-curve has been advocated by Robert Kohls, who proposes not one but two low points during the course of a sojourn.

The interesting thing about culture shock is that there are routinely not one but two low points and, even more interestingly, they will accommodate themselves to the amount of time you intend to spend in the host country. That is, they will spread themselves out if you are going to stay for a longer period or contract if your initial assignment is for a shorter time. (Kohls 67)



The broken line indicates the extreme in severity with which culture shock may attack.

This presupposes, of course, that the sojourner has some idea of how long he will remain in the host culture. If we accept Kohls's modifications of Gullahorn and Gullahorn's W-curve, and if we add to it a preliminary stage that takes into account the sojourner's initial contact with, and preparations for, living in the host culture, we can construct the following graph of the experience of being foreign:



Each phase delineated by the graph is marked by a number of characteristic features, one of which is usually predominant. The first, or Preliminary Phase, includes the initial awareness of the future host culture, the decision to leave the home culture, preparations for the sojourn, farewell activities and ceremonies, and the effects of the trip from the home to host culture. This phase is generally marked by a rising sense of anticipation tempered by, or alternating with, regret at leaving. The second phase begins with the foreigner's arrival in the new setting and ends when the early experiences there begin to pall. Arrival is usually accompanied by a rising tide of emotions, among which the foreigner is likely to careen erratically. Initial impressions, which at first convey a sense of the monumentality of the experience, later tend to well inward at an increasingly unmanageable rate and to devolve at times into barely distinguishable blurs. Throughout this stage the foreigner can be characterized as a largely passive, but intensely alert, spectator. This Spectator Phase usually comes to an end when it becomes no longer feasible to maintain the passive stance toward the host culture and when the intensity of the new impressions subsides.

During the third phase, the foreigner-sometimes willingly, sometimes not-finds himself taking a more active role in his new setting: he is now more a participant than a spectator. At first, this new role may produce frustration because of the difficulty of coping with even the most elementary aspects of everyday life. But once a person begins to accept the difficulties inherent in the cross-cultural situation, it becomes possible to devote attention to making sense of them, to venture forth and engage one self, even if only tentatively, in those areas of the culture that holds forth at least a limited appeal. There comes a point in this phase when the difficulties one initially encounters may become challenges to accept rather than unpleasant situations to avoid. And, as the number of challenges and accomplishments accumulates, the earlier discouragement often gives way to a growing sense of self-esteem, satisfaction, and self-confidence. On the other hand, it is in the Increasing Participation Phase that the cross-cultural experience varies the greatest from person to person. Characteristically it involves a clash of cultures, a conflict between one's own culture-based behaviors and values and those of the host culture. It may result in extreme resistance to adaptation and a more or less straight-line descent to the nadir of culture shock. Or, for the more flexible person, it may mean a series of small maladjustments that are overcome one by one. Others experience a roller coaster of highs and lows as they surmount barriers to communication and contact only to discover abysses of value and perceptual difference. For those who are more successful, the phase of Increasing Participation constitutes an acceptance of, and tentative involvement with, the external manifestations of the host culture. But as the sojourner develops a greater ability to tolerate and cope with the external cultural patterns, little by little they become internalized, relegated to areas of the subconscious. Eventually the individual acquires alternative ways of behaving, feeling, and responding to others, both of which seem equally valid: one has been instilled in him by the processes of enculturation in his homeland, the other has been acquired through his recent interaction with the host culture. At some point during this process, however, there seems to occur a kind of crisis of personality, or identity, a period when the individual feels poised precariously over the abyss that seems to separate the two cultures. It is as though the sojourner's awareness of the ability to function well in the host culture has triggered an awareness of the completeness of separation from the home culture. It is at this stage that all life can seem artificial and pointless. There is a deep sense of the ambiguity of one's position: on the one hand, the newly acquired cultural identity opens significantly new vistas of experience; yet on the other hand those vistas are

gained through an awakening, which is both intellectual and profoundly visceral, to the insight that all experience--even the experience of one's self-is culturally determined. Hence, the sensation arises that life's deepest values are fundamentally a fabrication, an illusion, a kind of grand pretense supported by the vast majority of people. Thus the Shock Phase strikes those who achieve some success in their first efforts at adaptation, as well as those who do not. Most people who pass through this Shock Phase of the experience of being foreign do not recognize it in precisely these terms, if, indeed, they recognize it at all.

Usually a person who has been getting along in the host culture quite well for a good length of time will find himself, for no immediately identifiable reason, sunk into a lethargy or depression, indifferent both to members of the host culture and to fellow countrymen. This state can persist and develop to crisis proportions, with the foreigner manifesting a number of symptoms of severe psychological disorder. Richard Brislin has noted some of the more familiar symptoms typical of this Shock Phase:

No one sojourner will experience all symptoms of culture shock that have been reported., but almost all will experience some. There is an excessive preoccupation with personal cleanliness, manifested in worries about drinking water, food, and dirt in one's surroundings. People become irritable at very slight provocations. They over interpret hosts' helpful suggestions as severe criticism, and they begin to feel that hosts are cheating them. Sojourners develop other negative feelings toward hosts, refusing to learn the local language and incorporating pejorative slang terms into their vocabularies. There is a sense of hopelessness with life in the host culture, and a strong desire to interact with members of one's own nationality. However, they may not interact if given the chance since they are uncomfortable with themselves and do not want fellow nationals to see them in such a state. Sojourners experience a decline in inventiveness, spontaneity, and flexibility, so much so that their work declines in quality. People feel lonely, find it difficult to communicate their feelings to others and, consequently, have a great deal of time to contemplate how unfortunate they are. (Brislin 156-57)

The Shock Phase represents a kind of existential confrontation with the abyss of meaninglessness that separates the two cultures the individual has internalized. Once the effects of facing this abyss have abated, subsequent experience usually leads to a more thorough adaptation to the culture. Adaptation is the endpoint of the experience of being foreign, the point at which the sense of foreignness no longer exists. In the learning of a second language, the equivalent to adaptation is not so much the achievement of native proficiency as it is surmounting the need to think through what one is going to say before saying it. Now thinking and speaking become simultaneous activities of the mind, the one being merely the internalized aspect of the other. Among the indications that a person has reached the Adaptation Phase of the experience of being foreign are the following:

...One aspect of the adjustment process is an "identification" with the host country. Factors leading to identification include the development of new reference groups, a feeling of belonging, perceptions that sojourners are accepted by host-country citizens, and a sense of "shared fate" concerning current events in the host country. (Brislin 124)

The "shared fate" concept has been elaborated by other observers. It is not only a sense of being comfortable within the host culture that the assimilated foreigner develops but an awareness, from time to time at least, of being at one with it, a sense of being not only in it but of it as well. It is a phenomenon that comes close to resembling a state of mystical ecstasy and which has been explained at some length by Edward T. Hall as "congruence." He conceives of it as the relatively infrequent though not unusual resonance of a number of cultural patterns within an individual, a group, or an event that epitomizes the very essence of the culture. As he explains,

...congruence can be expressed as a pattern of patterns. Congruence is what all writers are trying to achieve in terms of their own style, and what everyone wants to find as he moves through life. On the highest level the human reaction to congruence is one of awe or ecstasy. Complete congruence is rare. One might say that it exists when an individual makes full use of all the potentials of a [cultural] pattern. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is an example. Complete lack of congruence occurs when everything is so out of phase that no member of a culture could possibly conceive of himself creating such a mess. Lack of congruence in dress is always obvious and often humorous-witness the endless cartoons of natives wearing a loincloth and a silk hat. In architecture when Culture A borrows architecture from Culture B, Culture A takes the sets' [constituent parts] but not the pattern. Witness the outrageous Greek columns on any suburban mansion. {Hall 124}

Numerous examples could be cited of foreigners who have adapted so thoroughly to American culture that they have come to exemplify aspects of it. Among them are such names as Vladimir Nabokov, Henry Kissinger, Roman Polansky, Werner von Braun, and Jerzy Kosinski, to mention only a few. The phenomenon exists in other cultures as well. Joseph Conrad, born and raised in Poland and later recognized as one of England's most important modern novelists, and the Soviet writers Fazil Iskander and Chingiz Aitmatov, born and raised in Abkhazia and Kirghizia respectively but later celebrated as masters of Russian fiction, demonstrate the widespread nature of this phenomenon.

Strictly speaking, the experience of being foreign ends with this fifth phase, Adaptation, but often there is a sequel, a further episode called the Re-entry Phase. This stage occurs when the sojourner returns to his homeland and experiences culture shock in reverse. It is a process that is all the more painful for being the least expected of all the phases described here. And, perhaps not so surprisingly, those who have succeeded in adapting best to the host culture usually have the most difficulty re-adjusting to the homeland. While the Re-entry Phase can be regarded as a somewhat compressed version of the entire preceding five phases, usually the third phase, Increasing Participation, is somewhat modified. The returned foreigner most often goes through a period of resistance that evolves into a state of shock. Some observers, however, characterize the Re-entry Phase differently from the other five phases:

Sojourners are excited about sharing their experiences, but none of their old friends or family members want to hear about them. As one businessman put it, others would rather talk about Uncle Charlie's roses. They realize they have changed but cannot explain how and why. Further, their friends sense a change and are likely to make trait attributions ("irritable," "mixed-up") rather than situational attributions based on the sojourner's recent experiences.

Because of their disorientation and the reactions of others, returning sojourners are often rather unpleasant, feisty, and lacking in social graces. (Brislin 131).

With this description of the Re-entry Phase, the principal features of the experience of being foreign have been introduced. But the foregoing graph and description of the experience should be regarded more as an approximation than as a scientifically accurate and predictive representation of what will happen to a person who undertakes a sojourn in another culture. Just as personalities and situations differ, so is each individual's sense of his experience of being foreign likely to differ from the general pattern. For some foreigners the initial period of excitement may be missing or greatly reduced; for others the Shock Phase may be only barely noticeable or the memory of it may be suppressed; and for still others, there may be no emergence from the frustration and disappointment usually experienced at the outset of the Increasing Participation Phase. Still, despite the differences in individual instances, the pattern generally seems to hold for a majority of cases.

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