

Reverse Culture Shock in Expatriate Wives

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Abstract

This questionnaire-based descriptive study looks at the reverse culture shock experience of expatriate wives returning from living overseas with their families. Results show a significant morbidity in this group of women. 70% admitted adverse psychological effects such as homesickness, loneliness, boredom and depression. Many faced important practical difficulties, the most frequent of which were related to house and home (65%), finding employment (30%), or finding an NHS dentist (30%). Half of the respondents had difficulties relating once again to their friends in UK, but a smaller number (30%) also had problems relating with their extended families. Participants were asked to offer advice they would give to other expatriate women. The data obtained has formed the basis for an advice sheet.

Introduction

Reverse culture shock includes the physical, social, psychological, financial, educational, and cultural trauma that may be experienced when an individual or group of individuals (such as a family) return from one culture to their culture/country of origin. Whilst there may be some support for students, business personnel and other professional workers, I was unaware of any facilities for expatriate wives to receive a debrief, attend a repatriation workshop or be given any formal advice on preparation for repatriation.

Aim

The purpose was to ask these women to draw on their own experiences, and give contemporary advice that they "wish I had been told". My aim is to improve such advice, and accessibility to this advice.

Objectives

To gain a general understanding of the problems of reverse culture shock. .
To obtain information and advice from women returning from overseas
To develop a fact sheet of information and advice.

Project Design and Implementation

Methods

1. Literature search in journals, books and through the internet to document previous research in this subject.
2. Develop a questionnaire to use as a tool for gathering information. This is a questionnaire based descriptive study. It is fundamentally a qualitative study but some questions allow a degree of quantitative analysis.
3. Implement this questionnaire by using a sample of repatriated wives.
4. Analyse results.
5. Information obtained was used to produce a fact sheet.

Participants – A questionnaire was circulated to women who were repatriated to the UK, following a period of at least one year living and/or working in another culture. I gave questionnaires to my own personal contacts who in turn passed these on to their contacts.

Instrument – An anonymous questionnaire was formulated, asking:

- i) reason for return,
- ii) details of any difficulties experienced,
- iii) what shocked you most,

iv) factors which may have influenced the severity of reverse culture shock. The final two questions gave women the opportunity to offer advice that should be given to other expatriate women:
 i) before leaving for abroad, and
 ii) before returning home.

A variety of questions reflected my view that all aspects of family/home life impact profoundly on a wife/mother, which have a direct influence on her level of re-entry shock.

Data Analysis – Results were reviewed using simple analysis and presented descriptively to provide a verbatim reflection of the information.

Results

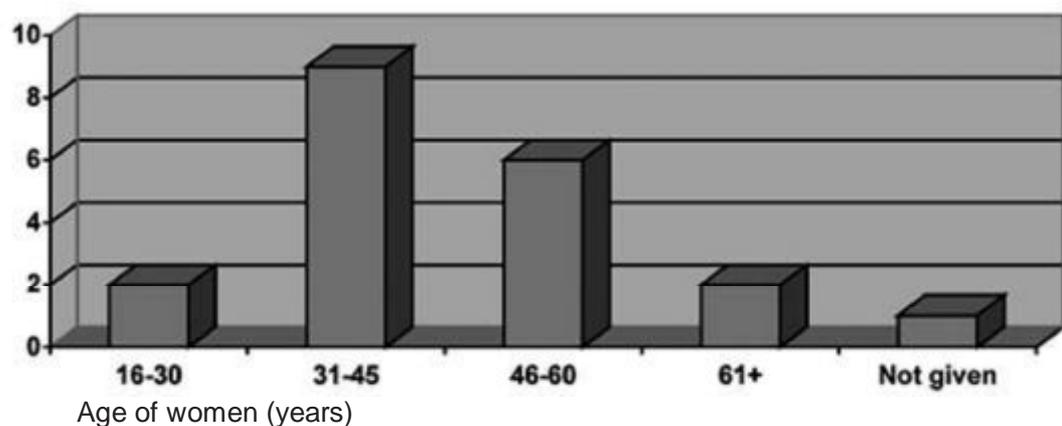
Number of questionnaires returned: 20

Anonymous Personal Identification Details

i) Age of women on return to UK:

Most (45%) of the women were in the age bracket 31-45 years.

Number



ii) Children accompanying family

13 (65%) of the respondents had children with them when they returned to UK. 3 (15%) had no children and 4 (20%) had children who had already left home or who had gone to university by the time of return.

iii) Host Countries:

13 women had returned from resource-poor countries, and 7 from resource-rich countries.

Difficulties Experienced on Return to UK

i) Difficulty in husband finding a job, re-integrating into previous position, or being demoted?

Yes: 6 (30%) No: 12 (60%)

In two cases this question was irrelevant because the husband was retiring.

ii) Impact on relationship with husband/partner:

Better: 11 (55%) No difference: 5 (25%)

Worse: 3 (15%)

One participant did not respond.

Sample quotes

Worse:

“Made a distance between us as each tried to cope with individual stresses.”

iii) *Financial strain?*

Yes: 4 (20%) No: 16 (80%)

“difficult to get a house initially as we could not open a bank account as we had no credit rating. Couldn’t get credit rating as we had no bank account!”

“returning from Nepal (we) felt very determined to live simple lives and not become trapped in pursuit of materialism.....sadly, some of that has worn off.”

iv) *Personal experience of adverse psychological effects:*

6 (30%) participants claimed to have not had any homesickness, loneliness, or any other problem in this area, but the majority (70%) admitted to difficulties.

**Table 1:
Adverse psychological experiences on return to UK**

Experience	Number (percentage)
Homesickness for previous country or lifestyle	13 (65%)
Lonely	7 (35%)
Boredom	4 (20%)
Depression:	4 (20%)*
Requiring Counselling	1 (5%)**
With use of extra Alcohol	2 (10%)

*one 16 year old daughter also had depression on return.

**on an informal basis.

“The most difficult thing was ****(husband) being depressed for the first 3 years. Also, not knowing what the ‘form’ was for birthday parties, dinner parties etc. and the ‘dress’ code. You need to fit in.”

v) *Practical Issues:*

**Table2:
Practical difficulties experienced by repatriated wives/partners**

Difficulties	Significant	Minor	Not Applicable
House/Home	13 (65%)	0	
Children’s schooling	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	4 (20%)*
GP and Dentist services	6 (30%)**	0	
Own employment	6 (30%)	1 (5%)	4 (20%)***

*Either no children or no longer of school/college age

**All 6 had difficulties finding an NHS dentist, several “going private”.

***Retired or not looking for paid employment.

Sample quotes:

House/Home difficulties:

“Tenants left 2 months before we returned, therefore we had a reduced income.”

“Used to house-staff. Had to learn to do everything again!”

Schooling difficulties:

“Bit frosty about us being late for school term dates.”

“First child used all our savings for private education.”

Dentist/GP difficulties:

“Hard to get a dentist.”

“Remained registered with local surgeries – visited annually during leave.”

Own employment difficulties:

“Difficult to keep up with my profession. Bought membership of my professional body, journals, textbooks and some short training courses.”
“Had to take ‘Back to Nursing’ course, despite actively nursing in Canada.”

Friends

“Probably got a bit fed up with the mention of”
Friends - lack of common ground

Family

“Frequently missed family events.”
“Family – worse being near them and blissful overseas!”

d) What has shocked you most on your return?

Of the 28 answers, 8 (29%) were concerned with other people’s attitudes, 5 (18%) morals and behaviour, 4 (14%) living standards. There was a wide variety of comments, as follows:

Attitudes & Interests

“Odd views of Africa.”
“Uncaring people. Excess materialism and wasted resources.”

Morals and Behaviour

“Deterioration of moral standards.”
“The number of violent crimes particularly involving children and teenagers.”

Living Standards

“House prices.”
“Degree of choice.”

Personal Issues

“Feeling I don’t belong here anymore.”
“How little you see of family and friends, despite being back in the country.”

e) Factors which may have influenced the severity of reverse culture shock:

Were (nuclear) family in agreement to return to UK?

Yes: 16 (80%) No: 1 (5%) Equivocal: 3 (15%)

All women reported at least one form of communication with “home”. The younger and those more recently posted abroad were more likely to have used e-mail facilities. The older responders relied on traditional letters.

Was your partner/ spouse able to help you and your family back “home”?

Yes: 17 (85%) No 3 (15%)

One of the ‘No’ replies stated that her husband went abroad again immediately “while the kids and I struggled with everything else”. She apparently ended up having a massive row with her mother-in-law.

v) On return to UK, did you have a “debrief” of any kind?

Yes: 3 (15%) No: 16 (80%)

Not applicable: 1 (5%)

Was your overseas experience of value/used?

Yes: 17 (85%) No: 2 (10%) Not answered: 1 (5%)

f) Impact of Returning Home on Children

There were a total of 35 children in the 20 families of women surveyed in this research project, not counting those children who were already “grown up” and had left the family home. An analysis of severity scores according to age shows that there is a gradual tendency for an increased severity score as children get older.

Table3:
Average Severity of Difficulty Score (in readjusting to “home” life) according to Age Group of Children

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Average Severity Score for Group</i>
1 to 5 years	3.4
6 to 11 years	5.3
12 to 18 years	6.5

There seems to be some evidence from this study that ‘the older the child the greater the trauma’. One 16 year old did find it very traumatic and became depressed.

g) Sample of Respondents’ Suggested Advice Before Leaving for Overseas

“How will you spend your time?”

“What’s not available in local area.”

“Try to arrange annual trips home to maintain relationships and re-familiarise with UK life/cost of living.”

“Don’t be afraid to admit homesickness.”

“Don’t expect to automatically get along with other expats. They are as foreign to you as the nationals, be prepared for differences.”

“Learn the language.”

h) Sample of Respondents’ Suggested Advice before Returning from Overseas

“Be realistic about your chances of re-integrating into the UK workforce. You may have to update or retrain.”

“Expect it to be more challenging to return than leave.”

“Minimise the number of new things – there will already be plenty of readjustment to make.”

“Your children may not be ‘coming home’. To them the UK is another culture.”

“Be prepared for people not to be interested in your adventures.”

“Think of yourselves as making a new start in a new place.”

Discussion

I sent far more questionnaires than I had returned to me but achieved a 62% response rate. There was a reasonable age spread of respondents, and a variety of countries in which they had lived. The limited number of replies does not allow a reliable comparison of responses; a larger study would be necessary to achieve this.

Reverse Culture Shock Difficulties Experienced on Return to UK

This research project has identified the significant morbidity experienced by repatriated wives. 70% admitted adverse psychological effects such as homesickness, loneliness, boredom and depression. Many faced important practical difficulties, the most frequent of which were related to house and home (65%), finding employment (30%), or finding an NHS dentist (30%). Although 6 (30%) of the study population experienced employment difficulties for their husbands, only 3 (15%) related a worsening of their relationship as a result of return to the UK.

One participant writes,

“ It can be worse the longer you are away, but also the more intensively you are involved with the host culture. ...I was doing research and living with local families..13 monthsbecame totally absorbed in Indonesian culture.....return was very difficult...depressed...lonely...had problems in my relationship with my husband.”

Expat memories

Only 3 (15%) of my study group received a debrief. Failure to hold debriefing meetings or to offer ongoing support may leave repatriates suffering crippling reverse culture shock for many months. While the results of my questionnaire showed only two adults and one 16 year old suffering depression on re-entry, the majority claimed homesickness and loneliness which gradually faded away.

Americans lead the way

From books and internet sites I have researched it is obvious that the Americans are far more geared up to the issues of repatriation, its difficulties, the need for debriefing and support of staff, their spouses and "Third Culture Kids" (children who have been born in one culture, spend most of their childhood lives in another, and then return to a changed culture of origin). Hopefully, with many businesses becoming more global, this need will be better addressed in the future in the UK.

General comments

Your country is your home. You expect to feel secure, at ease and familiar with the way of life and with the family and friends you had left behind. It comes as a surprise to discover that rather than feeling relaxed and enjoying being back, you feel somewhat detached, even alien.

Home alone

It is harder for a woman to face the various responsibilities of re-entry if her husband is not there to help and support or if either of them is trying to deal with psychological issues. With pre-re-entry planning, it is possible that women may be able to arrange for support and guidance.

Family and friends

The reactions of family and friends may be confusing, ranging from barely having time to have the shortest of conversations to the other extreme, of almost suffocation, due to their desire to meet your needs. From my questionnaire, 50% of expatriates had problems re-engaging with friends and 30% had problems with family. Results indicate that there is a need to keep relationships alive and fresh. Sharing of life's day to day triumphs and trials with those 'back home' is important.

Leaving the host country

Stress levels are high when organising departure from the host country, saying goodbye to friends, helping the children say goodbye to their friends, and organising the next stage of the family life back in UK. Eakin writes: "In order to make a successful re-entry, attention must be paid....to a good leave-taking of the country of assignment. Closure must be put on the overseas sojourn".

Exhaustion from packing and leaving and disorientation on arrival all add to the stress. My questionnaire results highlighted the fact that 65% of the participants had housing problems on their return to UK resulting, in some cases having to use temporary accommodation and then face the upheaval of moving yet again in a short space of time.

Emotions

Daily routine abroad may well have begun as early as 5a.m. in the host country. Waking automatically at this hour in UK can be frustrating and particularly difficult if it is cold, wet and generally depressing outside. Any sense of not being able to cope can be distressing and embarrassing.

Practicalities

There may be difficulties finding employment and paying bills, which have soared in the utilities sector in recent years! Interhealth in London has a careers counsellor who will give informed advice, help and ongoing support. There is the expense of buying one

(or possibly two) cars and the time consumed doing this. Eakin also says: "it is important for each member of the family to have a little breathing space.....too much togetherness can exacerbate frustrations. Teenagers especially need some private time".

Loneliness

The loneliness of re-entry can be bought on by: 1) a sense that no-one cares, they are all too busy leading their own lives; 2) a homesickness for the place, friends and lifestyle now passed; 3) the hectic pace of life in UK especially if the overseas posting was rural or remote; 4) the volume of traffic and people; 5) the overwhelming amount of things that need to be done and arranged. It can result in heavy drinking/smoking, family disputes and a strong desire to return overseas (run away!) Some families may make the time to take a long holiday on the way home, but the pressures of careers, school term dates and the many other issues which draw us into a hectic lifestyle are hard to resist.

An alternative view

On the whole repatriates, especially wives, just seem to 'get on with it'. Re-entry is best regarded as entering into 'another culture' If the UK is viewed with the same sense of adventure and open-mindedness as was applied when first going out to the host country, then hopefully the traumas and frustrations will be minimised.

Recommendations

a) Planning for repatriation

Having a home base to return to goes a long way to making the homecoming far less stressful. Knowing where you will be living helps to plan future schooling for the children, and the wife has some idea of the possibilities for her work/career and the proximity of family and friends. Endless hours of speculation and uncertainty are avoided. This all hinges of course on where the husband will find employment.

b) Maintaining close communication with family and friends is crucial.

c) Practical Recommendations

Applications for nursery/schools/colleges and university need to be underway. Updates or retraining may be needed in order to continue in employment. Courses/seminars can be arranged to coincide with leave during the contract. Have appropriate journals/ magazines sent out to enable ongoing familiarity with professional matters. Arrange communication links, - may be difficult if in remote areas where there may be poor electricity supply to keep frequent contact via the internet. Enquiries need to be made about these possibilities. Keep home 'alive' with good communication, visits from friends and family and visits back to UK. Take a copy of Craig Storti's excellent book, 'The Art of Coming Home'¹.

"I'm afraid I may be becoming readjusted.....readjusting would take me back to what I was before" which may make the time overseas seem very surreal".

Keep contact with friends made abroad, whilst also seeking out other repats in your home area – thereby enabling long chats about difficulties, sharing experiences abroad without the listener becoming bored (!), and mutual support and laughter. Maintain a sense of humour.

d) Provision of a Fact sheet

The data I obtained has enabled me to produce an information leaflet containing advice to help minimize the impact of reverse culture shock. It is designed to empower women to bring their families back to UK with the minimal amount of distress possible. It could be offered to wives at travel health clinics and GP practices or by occupational health services. "Forewarned is forearmed".

Conclusion

This questionnaire survey has highlighted the degree and variety of difficulties experienced by wives returning to UK. During the gradual readjustment to life at home it is important to incorporate the positive aspects of the host country experience with the positive aspects of the 'new' life in the United Kingdom.

The suggestions made in this survey will go some way to highlighting the important role of travel health advisors, practice nurses and occupational health workers in advising women of the reality of reverse culture shock, how to recognise it and ways of reducing the incidence or severity. Organisations must become more aware of the need for debrief as a 'duty of care'. Critically, preparation for repatriation will go some way to avoiding some of the difficulties, frustrations and heartbreak.

"Make no mistake about it: Re-entry is an experience to be reckoned with, but when the reckoning is done and the accounts are cleared, you're likely to find that the price for your overseas sojourn was the bargain of a lifetime".

Elaine Richardson, SRN, SCM, DTM (Glas).

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References

1 Sorti C. (1997) The Art of Coming Home. Intercultural Press Inc., Maine, USA., pages 9 and 155.