

# BRAIN EXCHANGE

## CREATING THE KIWI DIASPORA

### Returning home from OE

*An investigation into travellers repatriating to New Zealand, having completed their OE*

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The overseas experience (OE) is an extended journey undertaken by young adults who travel and work abroad. Most OE travellers report a personal development in terms of intercultural and communication skills, self-confidence, independence and a more global outlook. This personal development implies that, similar to the reported nature of some other travel experiences like backpacking and volunteer tourism experiences (Noy, 2004; Wearing, 2001), the OE is life-changing. One could argue, therefore, that the return home from OE is a significant phase of the travel experience due to the long-term effect on personal development.

However, a dearth of literature exists on the return from OE. What has been published in OE literature focuses predominantly on stories from abroad (McCarter, 2001; Robertson, Mash, Tickner, Bird, Curtis, & Putnam, 1994), classifications of the OE (Bell, 2002; Milne, Poulton, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001) or the OE and career

development (Inkson & Myers, 2003; Inkson, Thomas, & Barry, 1999). With the exception of the career-specific studies driven by Kerr Inkson (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Inkson et al., 1999; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Myers & Inkson, 2003), little empirical research has been conducted into the return home from OE. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to: Investigate the in-depth personal experiences of returned OE travellers in terms of their transition to home; explore possible explanations for the varying levels of distress among repatriates; and consider how the transition from overseas to home can perhaps be made smoother for future generations of returning OE travellers.

In a wider context, despite the significance of the return home as a phase of the travel experience, and although scholars agree that returning home is harder than leaving (for example, Martin, 1984), due mainly to unexpected changes and unrealistic expectations or both returnees and those at home, this phase of the travel experience is barely researched in tourism literature. As such, a wider context regarding the repatriation experiences of students (Brabanta, Palmera, & Gramling, 1990; Butcher, 2003; Chur-Hansen, 2004; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1986; Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995; Rogers & Ward, 1993), expatriates on assignment (Hurn, 1999; McCormick & Wahba, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2002; Sussman, 1986, 2001, 2002), migrants (Ghosh, 2000), missionaries (Stringham, 1993), and children of expatriates (Yoshida, Matsumoto, Akiyama, Moriyoshi, Furuiye, & Ishii, 2002) informed this research.

Repatriation, return migration, or re-entry is the transition from a foreign country back to one's own after living abroad for a significant period. Repatriation is not an isolated event, but part of a continuous phase of transition, and previous empirical research consistently reports high levels of repatriate distress upon returning home. As Freedman (1986) explains, "when people have been temporary, transient residents (more than just tourists) and return from the foreign culture to their native culture, they will soon discover that their cross-cultural problems are far from over" (p.23). Therefore, transitional theories like reverse culture shock and the phases of repatriation have emerged out of previous research to account for these high levels of distress.

Reverse culture shock is "the psychological, physical and emotional symptoms of feeling like a foreigner in

[one's] own country" (Hurn, 1999, p.227), and is generally unanticipated by the returnee and those at home. Building on this concept, the transitional theories propose various phases of repatriation. One such theory, which provides repatriates with "conceptual handles... to anticipate the re-entry 'dip' and develop a plan that will reduce its depth" (Freedman, 1986, p.25) is the W-curve theory, first hypothesised by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963). This theory describes fluid phases of shock, recoil, adjustment, adaptation, and synthesis or integration with the home culture (see Figure 1).

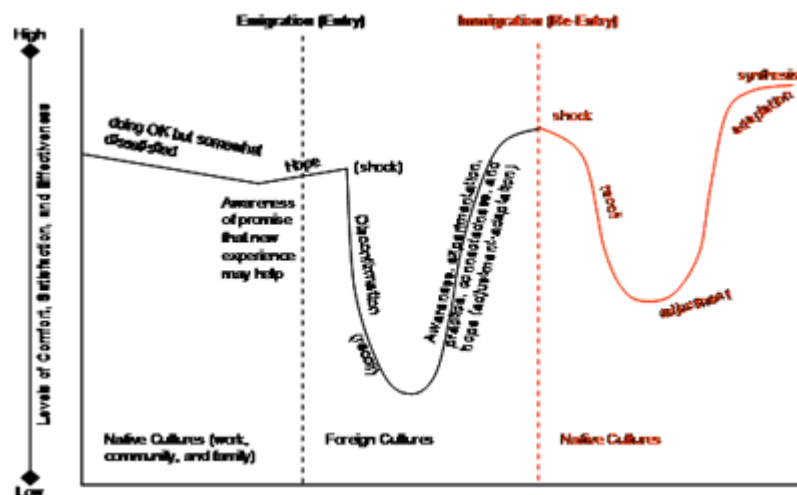


Figure 1 The W-Curve hypothesis model  
(Adapted from: Freedman, 1986, p.26)

This theory offers a generalisation of repatriation, whereby the depth of the curves may depend upon individual circumstances like personality, attitudes, and relationships, and where the cycle of culture shock, recoil and understanding is the same for adaptation to the foreign culture and re-entry to home. The theory also acknowledges that the dips tend to be shallower and peaks are higher for re-entry, because the returnee is at least partially familiar with the culture of home compared to the unfamiliarity of the foreign culture. Some scholars doubt the usefulness of the W-curve theory, because "while sojourners can usually identify points in their adjustment as highs and lows of the curve, it is not clear whether the model accurately represents most sojourners experience" (Martin, 1984, p.119); however, this theory can be loosely and usefully discussed within the qualitative results of this paper, as general experience of OE repatriation does indeed reflect waves of re-socialisation.

## Methodology

In-depth interviewing was deemed the most effective method for examining experiences of potentially sensitive topics like repatriation experience and transition distress, because interviews allow the interviewer to gather rich data and 'thick' descriptions, especially with regards to an individual's experience (McIntosh, 1998). Due to the conversational format of in-depth interviews, deep and detailed data can be collected with both parties feeling at ease through the rapport building that is inherent in the process. Rapport was built by this researcher as she understood the topic, offered her own personal experiences, created a comfortable interview setting, and kept the conversation informal, by using techniques like funnel questioning, sharing personal stories and active listening. These techniques allowed the researcher to gather the in-depth and personal experiences of respondents, gaining insights into the experiences and emotions they encountered on their return home. The conversations were driven by the thought processes of the interviewee, which encouraged the respondents to feel relaxed and comfortable while discussing their personal thoughts and experiences and enabled the conversations to flow smoothly and naturally.

This paper thereby proffers that empathy and rapport are essential skills for researchers in seeking a holistic and personal perspective of tourism; one that gives priority to the lived experiences of individuals throughout their own life course, rather than the narrow limiting frameworks of most historical tourism research. Critics of this approach would argue that the integrity and reliability of qualitative research is questionable as data cannot be extrapolated to the wider population and because the researcher may create bias in the results by following a particular line of questioning. However, the grounded in-depth approach to data collection adopted in this study, whereby data was systematically evaluated and compared against conceptual categories, enabled the researcher to generate common themes that emerged from the respondents' own 'stories'.

For the purpose of this study, an OE was defined as three months to five years away from home, as these timeframes imply a desire to settle in a foreign country temporarily and to return home eventually. The OE differs from the experience of tourists, emigrants, expatriates on assignment and refugees due to the intended length of the sojourn being longer than three

months and less than five years (Milne et al., 2001). In terms of how long the effect of repatriation lasts, the literature provides no guidelines and "anecdotal evidence indicates great individual variability" (Sussman, 2002, p.403). However, for the purpose of determining sample parameters for this investigation, respondents were selected if they had returned to New Zealand within five years of the interview, which is consistent with the Inkson & Myers' (2003) investigation of OE.

Approval was obtained by the University of Waikato Human Ethics Committee for this research. A total of 24 in-depth conversational interviews were conducted until saturation occurred as data fitted the research objectives with no new evidence or categories emerging (Jennings, 2005). The data gathered in interviews was audio recorded in all except two interviews, and field notes were taken by the researcher to highlight note-worthy remarks and to document non-verbal details of the interview.

### **Why OE Returnees Come Home**



This research method enabled the researcher to probe deeply into the experiences and emotions of repatriates. For example, although visa expiration was a common reason given initially for returning home, deeper probing revealed more complex, underlying motives like family and romantic relationships, lifestyle reasons and career prospects.

In terms of family relationships, respondents returned from their OE because they missed the aging of loved ones, or because they felt 'excluded' from family activities like birthdays, weddings and in some cases even funerals. Regarding romantic relationships, in some cases the desire to continue a relationship influenced the decision to return home, while for others it was the effect of a break-up overseas, for example: Being with him felt like another home, so when that fell apart overseas, that's when I really missed home, because suddenly I didn't have that home overseas anymore... I needed to be home... coming home was part of needing to heal. Conversely: My partner was at home and wasn't coming overseas, so it was either walk away from that relationship or come back to it... I decided to come back and now we're married.

Repatriates also returned for lifestyle reasons, like the pressure of the overseas living conditions or the desire

to settle down. The OE lifestyle can be exhausting and push travellers to return home for a rest, as these examples illustrate: Travelling is this exciting thing but it's one of the most stressful things you can do... In a living situation, you make decisions often but in a travel situation you make them every three seconds, 'Do we go left or right? Do we eat here or there?' People don't realise the pressure travel puts you under.

I was tired and worn out. I'd had no rest over four and a half to five years overseas, had overloaded myself with work and stress, my body was tired, and I was sick a lot. I needed to come home. I thought, 'I've had enough of this'. Even travelling... I needed a break from it. In London, you travel when you have a holiday, but travelling isn't really a holiday. I never gave myself a proper holiday; I was either working or travelling.

Moreover, for many OE travellers, the living conditions overseas can become "unbearable", for example the intense partying and living in over-crowded, often poorly heated and rundown houses that are located in dubious suburbs, to ensure cheap rent, as one respondent commented, "I was sick of living with flatmates who were terrible 'pigs', sick of living in party houses, sick of seeing the mould crawling across bedroom ceiling and living like that just so I could have money to travel". Another lifestyle-related reason for returning home was the desire to settle down. When OE travellers move cities as part of their OE, or change jobs repeatedly to allow for travel in between, they reportedly become weary of moving and meeting new people. Whilst respondents appreciated the development and learning experience of establishing a new life overseas, some questioned the need to undertake this process repeatedly and therefore eventually decided to return home.

As well as returning for friends and family or lifestyle reasons, some respondents, especially those without 'career advancing' jobs overseas, made the conscious decision to return home for career prospects. Interestingly, the majority of respondents changed career upon returning home, although one respondent found this high incidence of career change unsurprising: A lot of people go to university still unsure of what they are going to do. You are 17 when you decide what to do at university based on your seventh form papers. Let's say you're 21 when you come out, you might work for a couple of years, but you're doing that job because you

need a job and you've got a job. Then you travel and you do whatever it takes - you apply the stuff you've got in a job overseas, then come back at 28 or 30, and that's when you're finally sitting down and thinking, 'What am I actually doing with my life?' These respondents came home to pursue a more structured career and some respondents saw the return home as a unique opportunity to "start afresh" on a "clean canvass" in terms of working opportunities at home.

### **The Phases of Transition**

Although respondents returned home for a variety of reasons, most experienced, to some degree, a period of 'transition' from first impressions and comparing home to overseas, to thoughts of 'what's next?', then a period of adjustment to home and eventually a changing priorities and behaviours as the memory of the OE fades. This concept of a transition period emerged as a common theme among the responses, and was not anticipated as a specific objective of this research.

These phases of transition can be loosely applied to the W-curve theory of repatriation, because following the excitement of coming home after an extensive sojourn abroad, OE travellers, who have become used to a significantly different lifestyle overseas, are reportedly surprised and sometimes 'shocked' by misremembered aspects of home, as these comments illustrate: The pace of life is slower here than I remembered. It's frustrating. I didn't think it would be this difficult but I guess I have changed too.

A few weeks before Christmas, the streets were empty and everyone was saying, 'It's so busy in town' and 'Boy town was packed today', and I was thinking, (whispered) 'There's nobody in the streets; it's dead'. It was scary. I was having panic attacks about it.

I was very excited about coming home, I just couldn't wait. But once I was home, after about three weeks, I think I was ready to go back... I was just bored, there was nothing to do here.

In conjunction with these first impressions is a comparison between home and overseas with a "surprisingly critical view of the home culture" (Smith, 2002, p.256), which reflects the recoil stage of the W-curve, illustrated by these comments: When I got home, people were complaining about the pod decorations on



the roundabout... For almost an entire week it was in the newspaper on the front page and in letters to the editor. I thought, 'Who cares? People in the world have no power or food or water and we're concerned about stupid pods.'

I was surprised by my negative feelings towards my own country. I expected to feel joy at coming home and seeing family and friends, but thought, "Where's all the traffic? Where're all the people?" If you've been somewhere bigger and brighter, you feel bigger than your country.

With these comparisons between home and overseas, returnees experienced a period of questioning their decision to return, questioning the value of the OE, and ultimately having to decide "What to do next?" The OE had been a part of respondents' lives for so long, from saving for the OE to planning their trip and eventually leaving, that when they got home, many felt they had nothing to look forward to or plan for. Indeed, many respondents had not decided what to do when they got home or even which city to live in, and now that they were home they had to start thinking about the next phase of their life. This was the most challenging phase for most respondents, and some felt lonely and isolated due to the lack of support and understanding from friends and family. Additionally, the expectations of those at home put pressure on the respondents who were not used to people expecting them to "sort their life out", as these comments demonstrate: Moving on with the next phase of your life can be pretty hard to deal with, especially if people around you have expectations on what you should be doing... All of a sudden you have to cope with people's expectations on where you should be with your life, and you're not there yet.

There's a lot of pressure at home. People ask, "What are you doing with your life? What do you do? Where are you living? Have you got a job? Have you got a car?" It's a lot more pressure than overseas, where you were anonymous. You could be anybody doing whatever you want and there was no pressure to achieve. As these respondents had returned from their OE indefinitely, friends and family at home expected them to settle down and make long-term decisions, but this new responsibility, in contrast to their carefree and liberated lifestyle overseas, could be quite distressing.

Eventually, returnees noticed a period of adjustment or

adaptation as their lifestyle reverted to a day-to-day routine. This adjustment phase was signified by the desire to change from the transient lifestyle overseas to a more settled life at home, like purchasing a house, changing to a more permanent job, establishing more concrete friendships or beginning a new romantic relationship. As one respondent aptly summarised, "once you find a job and have a few friends around you, you soon get back into it. And I think that's part of it - a natural transition".

In the final phases of transition, those respondents who were satisfied with the more settled lifestyle at home, found that their priorities and behaviour had changed with time and their OE became "like a dream". This synthesis with the home culture reflects the final phase in the W-curve of transition. For some repatriates this synthesis represented a growth period, as they modified their attitudes and behaviour to suit the home culture. For example, some realised that criticisms of home can cause misunderstandings and curbed the verbalisation of these criticisms accordingly. Others integrated their new values and attitudes acquired on OE with the home values and attitudes, like cooking new foods for those at home. These repatriates tended to report a contentedness at being home, "getting into gear for a good life and settling down again".

However, although a commonality exists in terms of a transition period, it should also be noted that the intensity of this transition varies significantly among repatriates from severe depression, to annoyance and frustration with home, to complete and immediate acceptance of the home culture and way of life. For example, at the extremes of the transition experience, some respondents experienced severe depression, as one respondent reported: "I came home and just flipped. I was screaming, swearing, and acting like a six year old under any pressure... it was eight months and a couple of months of counselling before I had any memories of my OE." For another respondent, "coming home was so painful; it was terrible trying to get a life when everyone else had a life". In contrast, at the other extreme, some respondents experienced few or no issues on arrival at home as they adopted a get-on-with-it attitude to cope with and distress: "You just stick it out and think it can only but get better". This diversity in transitional experience may be explained by the individual circumstances surrounding each respondent's return, for example their readiness to return, expectations on

arrival, and individual personality. As repatriation is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of events and situations, repatriation experiences are individual and therefore subjective by nature.

## Conclusion



The return home is a significant phase of travel experience, because of the implication of its long-term effect on personal development (see also Zahra & McIntosh, 2006); however, it remains barely researched in tourism literature. Thus, this study sought to generate insights regarding the repatriation experiences of OE travellers. This paper contributes to tourism knowledge by describing the broader view of the return home from the OE, grounding the theory of the return home from a lengthy sojourn, and identifying the phases of transition that OE repatriates, specifically, experience. As repatriation distress was found in some cases to be a real problem for OE returnees, and as so many different factors can impact the repatriation experience, it is important to acknowledge and understand the phases of transition if future returnees' repatriation experiences are to be eased.

Practical considerations to recommend strategies to ease repatriation experiences can also be drawn from the findings of this research. In particular, the individualistic nature of repatriation would suggest that individual strategies could be applied by repatriates to ease their own transition distress. A reflection period is therefore advised in terms of thinking about the people and experiences that have impacted the OE, considering the changes within oneself and at home, reassessing values and goals based on these changes, and examining how these changes influence one's decisions regarding the 'next phase' of one's life. The OE and subsequent return can be life-changing and lead to self-discovery. Like backpacking (Noy, 2004) and volunteer tourism experiences (Zahra & McIntosh, 2006), OE repatriation can have a long-lasting effect in terms of attitudinal, behavioural and personal changes (Wearing, 2001). Overall, individuals need to understand that travel can affect one's life both negatively and positively, that they may encounter distress on return from OE or that, conversely, they may discover an unanticipated personal growth.

Travellers should also recognise that adjustment to the return home is sometimes more difficult than leaving,

and understand that like adjustment to the new culture, re-entry "takes time and occurs in stages" (Smith, 2002, p.256). The return home can be challenging and at times traumatic, due to the unexpected nature of repatriation distress. If repatriates expected these transitional difficulties, they may experience less shock and recoil in their transition home.

Indeed, it would appear that overall a wider awareness and understanding of the transition period is needed to ease repatriation experiences for OE travellers, as setting realistic expectations is fundamental to easing repatriation distress. "Sojourners who have the least preparation for repatriation and therefore presumably the least understanding of what is about to transpire when they return home, experience a repatriation more distressful than those who have a better understanding of the repatriation process" (Sussman, 2001, p.119). These expectations could perhaps be set through a network of returnees, whereby returned OE travellers may mentor those arriving home, or through practical initiatives like websites, seminars and programmes. Such initiatives could also be used to educate returnees regarding the phases of transition, inform them that "their adaptation experiences comprise a typical pattern and not an individual aberration" (Sussman, 1986, p.245), and encourage them to start planning the 'next phase' of their life before they return.

Along these lines, scholars have developed programmes and strategies for students, corporate repatriates and repatriates in general to overcome transition distress (for example, Rogers & Ward, 1993; Hurn, 1999; Werkman, 1986; Smith, 2002). However, while these strategies could be effectively applied to the OE repatriation experience, no information or training sessions are currently available for returning OE travellers specifically. Understanding repatriation, the effect travel has on the return home, and the phases of repatriation transition is important for not only policy makers, but also those at home, and returnees themselves if repatriation is to be eased for future generations of returning OE travellers. Further research in this area should therefore be encouraged.

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