

## **Teaching Expatriate Adaptation While Dealing With Reality: The Impact of a Tragedy on the Study-Abroad Experience**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the relevance of the accepted U-shaped models of expatriate adaptation to students engaged in an international educational experience when they are faced with a tragedy. In this study-abroad course, an examination of the existing adaptation models and how they provide a set of expectations for the process of cultural adjustment is presented as course material. During a particular four-week summer program, one of the nineteen students who went abroad died in an accident at the end of the first week. It became clear after the tragedy that the models studied failed to explain the impact of a personal tragedy of this magnitude on the students' adjustment process. This unfortunate event provided an opportunity to conduct a quasi-experiment to consider the impact of personal tragedy for students to question a body of research through their own personal experience and for scholars to re-examine and update the existing models to incorporate these findings.*

**Keywords:** International education; expatriate adaptation; tragedy; U-shaped models

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According to the 2012 Open Doors survey, 273,996 U.S. students received academic credit for study abroad in 2010/11, a 1.3% increase over the previous year. These students desire not only the international experience but also knowledge of how this experience may enhance their future work life. In addition to courses on language and culture, practical information on how to adapt and live in a different culture helps the students understand the process that expatriates and students experience when they move abroad. Relyea, Cocchiara, Nareatha, and Studdard (2008) found that participation in a study-abroad experience increased student's cultural intelligence, which is an absolute necessity for managers in today's global environment as it enhances the marketability of the students. If these students are future expatriates, understanding the process of adaptation to a new culture will help to ensure a successful experience both for them and for their employers (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig & Sabol, 2012; Ward & Kes, 2012).

This case study examines an ongoing study abroad program that focuses on the international workplace and the issues of adaptation. Based on the existing expatriate adaptation research, students have compared these models to their personal abroad experiences. Students in the program

have reported that this research has been relevant. This paper also reports the results of a quasi-experimental study based on a single incident, the tragic death of a classmate on a summer abroad program, and it offers an opportunity to rethink established theories of adaptation. There is no control group, and this study is not meant to critique nor extend the current theories; rather it is presented to offer a new question. Personal and emotional dimensions are not included in current theories; the literature emphasizes the social, cultural, intellectual and academic facets of the foreign experience. The tragedy that is the basis of this paper highlights a dimension of adaptation that is overlooked in current theory as well as the complexities associated with conducting this type of study.

The goal of this study is to bring the adaptation models out of the academic's predilection for prediction and insert the exception that the current adaptation models fail when an individual is confronted with an unexpected and tragic occurrence. For most expatriates and students, adapting to the new culture consumes most of their time and energy. To date, there has been no research that has examined the impact of a tragedy on the study-abroad/expatriate models.

It is well established that many multinational corporations invest substantial amounts of capital in sending their employees to other places. For the business, this investment in both time and money may help to facilitate entry into new markets while for the expatriate employee, this experience may assist in the development of international management competencies (Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley, 1999). These competences include an understanding of and experience in cross-culture interactions (Black and Mendenhall, 1991), open-mindedness, broader horizons, awareness of cultural relativity and increased self-understanding (Marion, 1980). Despite the short duration of the study-abroad international experience, the students all relate to the existing research models.

There have been over 50 years of research examining the adaptation of visitors to a new culture. Over these years these models have expanded to better explain the phenomenon; however, there remains a gap in the literature surrounding the effects of tragedy on adaptation. Initially, Lysgaard (1955) found that the adaptation experience was an ongoing process. He suggested that adjusting to the new culture followed a U-shaped curve. At the beginning, the expatriate is excited to be in the new place and eager to adjust, as though he/she were at the top of a "U." However, at some point, the expatriate will experience "crisis," where his/her knowledge of how things work at home versus how they work in the new location will make the "outsider" feel lonely and unhappy. This plummets the individual to the bottom of the "U." Once this passes, the expatriate will begin to learn more about the culture, feel more integrated into the foreign community and begin to regain the enthusiasm of living and working abroad.

Oberg (1960) modified and redefined the stages of Lysgaard's 1955 U-shaped model. Oberg's version also begins with a "honeymoon" stage of enthusiasm and fascination with the new location. Rather than experiencing a "crisis," Oberg suggests that inevitably, something will happen to the employee that leaves the individual feeling alone and missing the comforts and familiarity of home. At this time, the expatriate slides down to the bottom of the curve, entering a period of "culture shock." Oberg used the term "culture shock" to describe such feelings as anxiety, confusion and strain that may occur when an individual comes into contact with a new culture. Additionally, the expatriate may be overwhelmed with a variety of other emotions including distress, hostility and withdrawal. Once the individual begins to experience these emotions, he/she resides at the bottom of the "U-shaped curve." At this point, the employee experiences the most difficult period of the entire adaptation process (Harris & Moran, 1979; Harvey, 1985; Jacobson, 1963; Kepler, Kepler, Gaither & Gaither, 1983, Lysgaard, 1955; Torbion, 1982).

Adjustment is the third phase of this model. It includes the employee's integration and enjoyment of the new culture (Nash, 1967). Adjustment occurs when the expatriate realizes that in order to be successful, he/she must learn to make the best of the new culture. Over time, successful adaptation is achieved by acquiring sufficient information about the host country and culture. Glanz (2001) takes a different perspective on this phase of the process and suggests that an individual's processing of the experience is an attempt to establish a "sense of coherence" with the new culture.

Other researchers have expanded the U-shaped curve by suggesting that a 3-stage model does not adequately explain the phenomenon (ex: Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) by adding a fourth and/or fifth separate and distinct phase to the expatriate adaptation model. Hofstede (1991) labeled his first 3 stages as (1) euphoria; (2) culture shock; (3) acculturation; and added the (4) stable state. While these stages are of varying length, Hofstede contends that the length tends to correspond to the assignment period of the expatriate's stay in the new location. The longer the duration of the expatriate's assignment, the longer he/she may spend in the earlier stages of the model.

McEvoy and Parker's (1995) model was slightly different: (1) honeymoon; (2) cultural shock; (3) adjustment; and (4) mastery. Du-Babcock (2000) reported that these four stages are characterized by moderate, low, moderate and then high levels of adjustment, respectively. When an employee has reached the stable state or mastery stage, he/she has figured out how to live in the foreign country.

Adler (1975) proposed a fifth stage of "independence" or "double-giving" (Yoshikawa, 1988) where the employee truly feels incorporated into the new environment. Once an expatriate embraces the societal beliefs and lives as if he/she were raised in that culture, the employee can live as a native in the foreign culture. However, Zapf (1991) suggested that this phase is more of an existential state than an adaptation stage.

The U-shaped curve models are not without critics. For example, Church (1982) has argued that the empirical support for the pattern has been weak and inconclusive. Furnham and Bochner (1986) stated that individuals adjust to their surroundings based on their unique personality traits rather than by strict adherence to a model. However, the models remain popular with both academics and practitioners due, in part, to the simplicity and predictive capabilities of the past research findings, and due to the many reports by expatriates regarding the value of this research to their own experiences.

Research has determined that adaptation may be either a "state" or a "process" (Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1988; Haslberger, 2005). Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) found that adaptation is a state when the adaptation relates to the degree of fit between the expatriate and the new location. When adaptation is examined as a process, the belief is that people adapt over time. The visitor learns about and then enacts the necessary changes in behavior in order to successfully navigate the new surroundings (Barnett & Kincaid, 1983; Kincaid, 1988). Students also adjust to their new surroundings over time and typically take pride when they interact appropriately in the foreign culture. As such, for purposes of this manuscript, adaptation is examined from the process perspective and the following Research Question is posed:

RQ1: When faced with a tragedy, are the accepted U-shaped models of expatriate adaptation useful for study-abroad student?

As part of the study-abroad program discussed in this manuscript, instruction on expatriate adaptation was included in class lecture due to its practical application to the program. The course materials introduced the students to the different models of expatriate adaptation, as an understanding of these model benefits the study-abroad student by mirroring his/her adaptation to the new culture.

The present research examines the existing expatriate adaptation models using an applied focus. For most expatriates and study-abroad students, adapting to a new culture consumes most of their time and energy, both during professional/academic time and personal time. The existing models discussed above suggest that the expatriate has no other issues in his/her life to distract from this adaptation process. What appears not to be studied in any of these models is the impact of a crisis or a tragedy that is not initiated by - and is irrelevant to - location or culture. Coping with this situation would overwhelm these individuals in their home countries. As a result, there is a need to account for unexpected situations, forces and issues in international work and education. Rather than trying to expand or modify the existing models of adaptation, the goal of this study is to examine the usefulness of the existing U-shaped models when “life” impacts the expatriate’s adaptation process. Phrased another way, what happens to the expatriate when “life gets in the way?”

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study reports the findings of a quasi-experiment. Respondents were 18 (16 female, 2 male) undergraduate and graduate students in communication and journalism participating in a summer study-abroad program entitled “International Communication and the International Workplace.” This is an annual program that was first offered in 1998 and has been run every summer since with the exception of 2003. The four-week program under investigation in this research was based in Paris, France and Brussels, Belgium from July 2, 2007 – July 30, 2007. Ten of the students were from a large Midwestern university and the remaining eight were from a large Southeastern university, all between the ages of 20 and 25. All students carried U.S. passports.

In the early hours of Sunday, July 8, 2007, a male participant was involved in an accident and died immediately as a result of his injuries. No other students from the program were with him at the time of the accident.

### **Procedure**

The course in International Communication and the International Workplace introduced the topic of expatriate adaptation via lectures during the second week of the course. Specifically the 4- and 5-stage versions of the U-shaped model were discussed in class. The authors are unaware of any prior studies examining the teaching and learning of expatriate adaptation.

The data were collected as part of the final exam in the study-abroad course due on the last day of the program. One open-ended question on the exam asked “[u]sing the information on expatriate adaptation and culture and using the unique events of our program, **how** and **why** would you make any changes to the models we discussed in class?” In addition, students gave their consent to be part of this quasi-experimental research design.

## Results

The findings illustrate how a tragedy can influence the process of adaptation to the new culture. The students reported that due to the events of the program, accepted models of adaptation can – and should – be questioned. This suggests that including a discussion of the unexpected during the lectures on adaptation is a valuable way to enhance the learning experience and to get students to engage in critical thinking.

As stated above, the existing models of expatriate adaptation work very well in helping students understand what is happening or is going to happen when they enter a new culture. While many of the students alluded to the value of learning these models, only one respondent explicitly stated that the existing research was important in helping her understand what was happening to her as she tried to make sense of the new surroundings and culture.

...there should always be a model because it really is something that helps you get through it, knowing these stages happen to everyone [Respondent #14].

In answering the Research Question, the respondents all spoke to how the death of a classmate at the end of the first week of a four week program interrupted their progression through the traditional U-shaped models of expatriate adaptation and gave them reason to question whether or not these models were relevant. Rather than following the four or five stages in order, the events of the program redefined the stages and the order in which they occurred and/or did not occur. For many, the tragedy abruptly brought them out of the honeymoon phase. It did not matter where they were or what culture they were experiencing; they simply needed to cope with the situation at hand.

There was no choice other than to deal with it because you can't change what happened and you can't change the reality you are in regardless of where you are. The honeymoon stopped, a few days of haze, then forced to adapt in the environment [Respondent #12].

I would say the model of expatriate adaptation stage 1 – the honeymoon stage – was shortened drastically because of the events of the trip. Instead of then moving to the culture shock stage, there was a stage of unknown [Respondent #3].

We all experienced the fascination as a first stage but I think during the honeymoon stage we were given not a culture shock but a life shock [Respondent #5].

For example, many of us skipped right over culture shock because we were dealing with something so much deeper and complex than someone adapting to a culture usually faces [Respondent #8].

Therefore, the U-shaped models did not apply to this unique situation. The students learned to question existing research by finding a gap in the literature. For some of the respondents, the culture shock stage did not occur. The existing models follow the descent from the happiness of the honeymoon phase to the distress of the culture shock phase caused by the inability to achieve a goal or to undertake an activity that is second-nature at home. However, this situation was not what these respondents experienced.

As respondent #5 noted, these students experienced a “life shock.” Their lives were negatively impacted, but not by the Parisian or French culture interfering with their ability to successfully navigate their surroundings, but by something that was both tragic and mysterious.

One respondent stated:

In my case, adjustment came before culture shock. I was thrown into this situation where I had no choice but to start adapting and then the culture shock and frustration came much later. [Respondent #6].

For this respondent, the order of the stages changed, and she was comfortable relating that the model did not fit her experience. When she finally came to terms with the tragedy, she then faced the realities and unhappiness typically associated with culture shock. Her feelings of anxiety and confusion occurred only after she dealt with the situation. Thus, the order of the stages within the model changed.

A few of the respondents stated that they had already encountered some type of negative experience and were already into the “culture shock” stage of adaptation when the tragedy occurred. For these respondents, the crisis intensified their ill-will towards the new culture.

For me, the death affected me during the culture shock phase, which made it last much longer than it would have [Respondent #9].

Personally, I was experiencing the fascination/honeymoon when I became ill. The stress of being sick combined with trying to contact a doctor and get medicine put me into culture shock. Then when the tragedy struck us, it put me in a deeper sense of fear and doubt [Respondent #4].

While prior research has not found a set period of time that an expatriate will spend in any one of the stages, these respondents felt that they were “stuck” in culture shock longer than they expected - another new wrinkle on the existing literature. The emotional reaction to the tragedy intensified and extended the feelings of unhappiness and delayed their entry into the adjustment stage.

Some of the respondents spoke of putting the tragedy into perspective.

This tragedy made me hate Paris at first until I realized that it could happen anywhere [Respondent #1].

It depends on the person and the situation. Unexpected things can happen and it can change your plans [Respondent #3].

In this case, a manager should factor in that a person might mix stages or even skip some stages all together [Respondent #10].

In the three weeks between the tragedy and the data collection, these respondents were able to understand that while models are predictive, their personal situation fell outside the expected experiences of a study-abroad student. It is important to note that none of the respondents dismissed the U-shaped model. Rather some respondents were able to understand that the process is not always linear and that stages can be skipped and/or replaced.

Many of us became oblivious to the French lifestyle because we were preoccupied with other matters, therefore I will call this new state “the oblivious stage” [Respondent #3].

It must be clear that the model is not clear cut. There can be many events such as the one we experienced causing a speeding up or skipping of certain phases [Respondent #8].

Thus, the responses suggest that a tragedy does impact the manner in which an expatriate adapts to his/her new environment, and the research question can be answered in the affirmative. In this unique case the tragedy made a definite impact on the usefulness of these models, and suggests the need to modify the models to include the possibility of unexpected occurrences.

### **Discussion**

The tragedy under investigation occurred at the very beginning of the adaptation process, so most of the participants were still in the honeymoon stage. Without exception, all respondents that reported being in the honeymoon stage up until the tragedy occurred wrote that they were jolted out of their fascination with Paris and into a state where they were forced to cope with a situation outside of their control. This event would have been equally devastating at home. However, the fact remained that they were in a new culture, and notwithstanding the tragedy, they needed to make sense of the customs of the new location in order to go about their daily activities. Thus, they had no choice but to begin to adjust to the culture around them. The respondents, both individually and as a group, figured out how to do what needed to be accomplished and incorporated the necessary changes to their behaviors.

While not a criticism of the prior research, there are times when an expatriate is faced with a tragic situation that disrupts the expected flow of the adaptation process. The research question asked whether a tragedy would change the traditional model of expatriate adaptation. The results suggest that the traditional U-shaped model is solely focused on the expatriate and his/her interactions with the new culture, but fails to take into consideration external factors or emotions that may impact the life of the expatriate.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

One limitation of this study is that a four-week summer study-abroad program is very different than a semester classroom or an extended stay by an expatriate. Instructors familiar with the study-abroad experience might suggest that a few participants stay in honeymoon throughout the four-weeks of the program, but most students will experience some form of “culture shock” when they are unable to successfully communicate or engage in an activity that is deemed routine at home. Thus, while it is possible – and very likely – for these respondents to have experienced the first three stages of the U-shaped model in that short time period, it may not fully mirror the experience of an expatriate on a year or longer assignment in a new culture. Lysgaard (1955) noted that the adaptation was the most difficult for expatriates that were sent abroad for 6 – 12 months. Employees sent for either longer or shorter durations had fewer problems. For these reasons, there are external validity issues with this research as its generalizability to non-students that need to be measured.

Quasi-experiments are valuable and exciting research opportunities that exist without the control and replication possibilities that most academic researchers cherish. Even in tragedy, there are possibilities to learn and further our understanding of phenomena. Hopefully this single case study tells us all we need to know.

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