

Continuum of Cross-Cultural Adjustment as a Result of American Studies Exchange Program

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Abstract

The article considers culture shock and reverse shock, or reentry-transition stress among Georgian exchange students of the International Black Sea University American Studies department, who are back to Georgia after their stay in Washington University in St. Louis, U.S. Cross-cultural experience stirs up the settled subjectivity, constituted through dominant culture. The transnational condition orients it to the other enclosure, the other nation, and the elusive character of the cross-cultural visitor's condition is emanated. It creates a consciousness that exists where it is not. It seeks fulfillment in being elsewhere. We have made up a continuum of turbulent, discursive emotional phases, experienced by the IBSU American Studies department students starting from interaction with Americans at home, in Georgia, visiting the U.S., and coming back to Georgia.

As for the intensity of culture shock, or reverse culture shock, there is no formula which is best to orient visitors, as each of us experiences different intensity of shock and develops individualistic coping strategies.

Keywords: culture shock, reverse culture shock, cope, social environment, physical environment, cross-cultural continuum, enclosure

Some millenarian thinkers presume, that the year 2001 marked much more than just the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. History, modernism, and the nation-state, along with existing political, economic, and social boundaries, were all expected flows of people and products, (Appadurai, 1996; Rajchman, 1995). This new mobility was expected to change not only where we lived but how we lived and who we thought we were.

Enhanced exchange across national borders was expected to transform peoples' sense of physical, social, and political. Too fundamental changes would occur in our sense of self and identity. In particular, theorists claimed, nation-states were becoming deterritorialized, and the national would no longer anchor human identities as it had in the twentieth century, (Glich Schiller et al. 1992; Basch et al. 1994).

There is no deny of the impact of the accelerated rates of cultural and economic exchange across national borders during the last three decades of the twentieth century. It's undoubtful that the things we produce travel faster, farther, and in greater numbers than ever before. New transportation and communication technologies allow humans to travel with great speed and to remain easily in touch with family, friends, and business associates over long distances. Videos, wireless telephones, cables, satellites, and the World Wide Web make sounds and images produced by people in one corner of the world readily attainable to persons living on the other side of the globe. Scarcely can be denied the fact, that the world is currently experiencing massive movements of people across national and regional borders: about 140 million persons now live outside the country of their birth. In this article we'll attempt to consider whether human mobility necessarily changes human subjectivity and how it does. The possibility that migration changes human identities is best studied, we believe, with methodologies that allow comparisons of people's emotional state while adjusting to another culture and during their readapting to their native culture.

Almost all students, business people, development work-

ers, and others who have adapted to another culture have gone through culture shock. The great majority handle the stress of cross-cultural adjustment successfully.

On the return home the sojourners undergo another adjustment period often termed "reverse culture shock" or "reentry-transition stress." According some observers this experience is even tougher and prolonging than culture shock. Thus, we attempt to make some observations on cross-cultural adjustment, as we believe this is quite a wide-spread phenomenon, especially in the XXI century reality.

Since the aim of the article is to consider culture shock and reverse shock among Georgian exchange students, who are back to Georgia after their stay in the U.S., first of all we'd like to bring causes, why the U.S. was and still is so attractive for visitors, immigrants.

The U.S. continues to be regarded across the world as the paradigmatic nation of immigrants and as a place where transformations of identity are obvious. The importance of the U.S. as a nation of immigration is great even during periods when other countries have received proportionately greater numbers of newcomers than has the United States. In the nineteenth and late twentieth centuries the vast size of the U.S. facing as it does two oceans has made it an attractive destination for a culturally more diverse groups of mobile people than most other countries.

Secondly, in an enormously interrelated world, the United States also functions symbolically as a hyper-present model of a culturally plural or multicultural nation of individuals with complex identities. This American adoption of multiculturalism is comparatively new, although. The theory of multiculturalism is contradictory to the melting pot principle and is described as the salad bowl theory, or the cultural mosaic. "Melting Pot" refers to assimilation – a process of consistent integration when members of ethno cultural group are "absorbed" into an established generally larger community, and it presupposes a loss of all or many characteristics which make the newcomers different. Whereas in the multicultural approach, each ingredient

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retains its integrity and flavor, while contributing to a successful final product.

The third perhaps most significant reason why so many migrants focus on the United States, is that globalism and transnationalism treats the U.S. as an agent of economic and cultural globalization. Surely, the impact of U.S. commerce and culture on the world is well supported.

The study of migration into, within, and out of the United States presents an opportunity to examine how globalization may be transforming human lives in the paradigmatic nation of immigrants; whether these transformations push recent immigrants in the new direction away from the importance of their ethnic cultural values. In which human relationships, if any, do mobile people accentuate their American or foreign national identities? In which relationships do transnational identities find a place? Are identities among contemporary travellers any more changeable, flexible, conflicting, and complex than those of the travellers of the past? So, the study of the identities of mobile people is of crucial importance.

The purpose of this paper is to make a small contribution to examining how identities are affected by mobility and cross-cultural communication based on the case studies of the IBSU American Studies program students, participants of the exchange project between International Black Sea University (IBSU) and Washington University in St. Louis.

Since 2004, Washington University faculty members and students have been regularly travelling to the South Caucasus for academic purposes, mainly to Georgia, to a lesser degree to Azerbaijan and Armenia. The purpose of these trips, the contacts with students and teachers from the region was guided by questions: What can Americans and Georgians learn from each other? What types of topics are conducive to this type of intercultural learning? In 2007 Professors from Washington University - Dr. Early and Dr. Joachim Faust selected four IBSU American Studies program advanced students to invite to Washington University in St. Louis free of charge to attend American Studies courses for about one month, give presentations on Georgian culture and expose them to the American Culture, American's Lifestyle. Thus American Studies department established cooperation with Washington University Liberal Arts department and since then the structural feature of the program, one constant element has been an annual trip of Georgian students to the United States, and annual trip of different groups of American students from Washington University to Georgia. The length of these trips to Georgia varied from fifteen days to seven weeks. The group size was between seven and twelve students per trip. As a result, altogether about sixty students from Washington University have traveled to Georgia during the past seven years. Each trip included traditional class meetings as well as class meetings with Georgian scholars and public figures. Prof. Faust always made sure to take Georgian students along with American students when going on excursions inside of Georgia, and even when traveling to Azerbaijan. Another important feature of the program has been home stays: American students usually spend about half of their time in Georgia, hosted by the family of one of their peers from the American Studies department.

Altogether fifteen Georgian students from IBSU – between 2008 and 2012 – have been able to visit Washington University in St. Louis. During each of their visits the students stayed in dormitories on campus and attended classes at the university.

Adoption to another culture ensues culture shock. Those

who claim they did not may not have perceived the signs, or perhaps they never really adjusted to the other culture. It's interesting to note, that the Georgian exchange students experienced first cultural shock in their home country hosting American students. Nino Iakobishvili said: "Encountering with polyethnic and multireligious environment seemed very dramatic for me at the beginning of the "Cultural Exchange" project. First of all, it was quite strange for me to be among the people with various religious affiliations and cultural backgrounds in my home country and accompanying them to places where I've never been before myself. In spite of my excitement, the first week of the adaptation went on O.K.;" American students experienced even more tension, as they came to a totally strange country where they at first didn't feel safe as their knowledge of the country was based on the information taken from internet sources, saying that Georgia was one of the politically hottest points in the world. According Nino, it made her more responsible to neutralize fear among seven American friends and show them that Georgia has great cultural traditions and history, and that the country was just the victim of contemporary political context.

Contrary to the popular opinion, long-term visitors seldom "lose" their native culture while overseas. Ironically they discover and identify rich points (Michael, 1994) of their culture by leaving it, but it may happen without leaving it. It's noteworthy that most of the Georgian students accompanying American guests in Georgia highland region Zemo Svaneti-highest inhabited area in the Caucasus, were first time in that region. Here, they got another shock, but in this case enculturation shock. The exchange program exposed them to rich points of their culture on the spot, without leaving the country. This is illustrated by a quote from a Georgian student:

"Svaneti was an absolutely breathtaking place. I've been to many places in my life, but I've never quite felt as much of an emotional connection as I did in Svaneti. This place is truly a gift to the earth. Svaneti trip made me think of Georgia's two wars. Historically Svaneti included the Kodori Gorge in the adjoining rebel province of Abkhazia. I felt sorry for the Kodori that is really great loss for my beautiful country. Then I tried to recall how our enemy occupied the territory but I could just remember the war of Abkhazia from people's telling. Then I remembered the recent war of South Ossetia. The feelings, emotions connected to the war were still acute and stressful for me. I could never imagine the war in 21st century. When I was watching the news about the events in Ossetia, I thought it was just Ossetian's problem. Now I feel whole Georgia is my home country, including occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Now I do understand – every piece of our small land has paramount importance for devoted Georgians." This example shows that thanks to the arrival of the American students Nino got wonderful chance to visit Svaneti and embrace its beauty first time, feel sorry for the lost Kodori Gorge territory. Sometimes people are more enthusiastic to explore foreign countries, cultures, while postponing, visiting and studying the prominent parts of their motherland, being sure that they are always at hand.

In a new culture, visitors become more aware of what makes them different and scrupulously study culturally rooted values, beliefs and thought patterns. They realize both greater awareness of their home culture and greater awareness of the individual "self" and of what is crucial to them. Travelers initially experience a short period of excitement and euphoria when entering another culture. They are enchanted with the

newness of everything and are meeting people want them to feel welcome. This period is often referred to as “honeymoon” phase because visitors are not yet fully engrossed in the host culture. Khatia Chelidze recalls: “America, the country where dreams come true, the land of the free, I had been dreaming about America since I was a teenager. And, in 2011 when I was told that I was one of the participants of the exchange program between the International Black Sea University in Tbilisi and Washington University in St. Louis, it didn’t take me so long to say “yes”. In January 2011, when I woke up and had a strange feeling, it was a very good feeling of happiness, because I was about to leave my country and chase my dream to America. I spent almost 37 hours traveling from Tbilisi to St. Louis, but when I arrived at the airport and saw the smiling faces of my American friends waiting, I was not exhausted and had no feeling of jetlag.” Khatia had been dreaming of visiting the U.S. for such a long time, while arriving in St. Louis, she forgot about tiredness, jetlag, and was absolutely enlivened and overwhelmed with excitement and positive expectations, the “honeymoon” phase started.

According Nino Iakobishvili American students’ different lifestyle, attitudes, regulations – permissible in Georgia, not in the U.S. were all different; Nino reflects on her culture shock in Saint Louis: “In Saint Louis I was unconscious of the stress; only after returning to Georgia from distant perspective I realized I had experienced real culture shock caused by rich points of American students’ and peoples’ lifestyle. Campus life is referred as “Wash U bubble” from where it is hard to get out and restrain from walking out in the evenings because of high crime rate limited my freedom; eating during the classes, student parties, underage restrictions, less hospitable environment all together seemed weird to me.” Nino observed difference in perceptions of representatives of two cultures: “Different attitudes, habits, and perceptions were the causes of at that time unexplainable irritation and extreme, homesickness.

I will never forget the facial expression of the man in the train of the underground station, when I bent down to take and give him his cell phone that dropped near me and him saying: ‘this is mine’, as if I was stealing it from him.”

Khatia Chelidze found rich points in the American educational system, different from the Georgian reality: “It’s amazing, that though some students were from the same city Saint Louis, where the university campus was located, they were still living in the dormitory on campus. From my point of view this was one of the biggest advantages of students’ lives. While they are living alone, they get the chance to learn how to stand on their own feet without parents’ support, they become more independent and expand their horizons. This was one of the biggest things I wanted to bring from the U.S. When students approximately of the same age live and study together, learning many things from each other is a lifelong experience. Khatia found cultural difference between the Georgian and American lifestyles. Georgian students will never live in dormitory if they live in the same city, where the higher institution is. She considers it advantageous for bringing-up more independent personalities. She made another observation, that American students are more competitive and well-organized.

“School work attracted my attention as well. Students are very hard-working, competitive and enthusiastic; are very attentive during lectures and make notes in their notebooks and make funny printing noises. If you ask me learning process is much tougher in the U.S., however, I’ve never been hearing

grumbling of the students. Their hard-working and enthusiastic attitudes are something we should learn from them, they do not hesitate to raise questions and present their ideas in class.”

Although almost all students, business people, development workers, and others who have to interact with host, national, within a new culture experience some kind of culture shock, the great majority cope with it successfully; it means they grow from the experience.

In our project case it took the students a couple of weeks to get adjusted to a different lifestyle. “Examples of rich points can be many more, but after a month I more or less got used to American lifestyle,” says Nino Iakobishvili.

According to Ana Metreveli, who spent a year in the U.S. as the winner of the IREX program, she underwent the same adaptation period. “I had just finished my sophomore year at IBSU when I left for the U.S. to continue my studies as an undergraduate exchange student for the period of two academic semesters at a U.S. university. I had never lived without my family before, let alone abroad, in a completely new social environment, and not surprisingly first couple of weeks took a toll on me. Fortunately, I soon got over the feeling of homesickness and started enjoying new people I met and new things I experienced, recalls Ana.”

On the return home the visitor undergoes another adaptation period often termed “reverse culture shock” or “reentry-transition stress.” This experience is even more astringent than culture shock and that sometimes it sets in much more quickly. As a result of interviewing our exchange students, it appears that degree or reverse cultures shock is different among different individuals: according Khatia Chelidze it causes uncertainty: “It is very difficult to come back, you are bored, feel uncertain, and you start comparing different things, associates: maybe your priorities change. There are some difficulties when you are planning to go abroad but from my point of view there is a lot more confusion when you come back in your country”.

This might be explained by the fact, that few returnees anticipate reverse culture shock. According to Gary R. Weaver (Weaver, 1994) when we predict a stressful situation, we handle it much better. We rehearse our reactions and try to find alternative ways to deal with stress. We are prepared physically and emotionally for the worst that can happen. We are excited to adjust to new food, transportation, new people, new environment. On the other hand, very few visitors worry about returning home. We are not rehearsed for it.

There is another factor to be taken into consideration: in an overseas culture, host nationals know very well that visitors will make mistakes and be different, understand that the sojourner will experience stress adjusting to the new environment and will miss friends and family.

In the home country, everyone expects the returnee to accommodate quickly. They are much less tolerant to mistakes and don’t think about the difficulties of reverse culture shock and it is not accepted. However, it’s all individual, and the friends and families differ from each other. Ana Metreveli analyses her reverse culture shock: “As the hustle and bustle of finals, good-bye parties and packing blew over, and I found myself on a plane to my home country, I realized that I was terribly missing my family and friends back in Georgia. And they didn’t disappoint me at all. I had been warned that I shouldn’t expect to pick up exactly where I had left off, that there may be some inconsistencies between expectations and reality, but my friends and family made the re-entry so much easier.” As

mentioned above, different sojourners pass through different rate of reverse culture shock on the return home, moreover, some don't experience it at all. Subsequently, the psychological makeup of the individual may be the most crucial factor. Some people can tolerate a great deal of stress caused by change, while others demand an unchanging environment to feel psychologically secure.

In some cases travelers easily develop new friendships and begin to feel quite comfortable with the social and physical environment. They begin to develop, adequate, flexible, bi-cultural personality. When the recovery period completes, the visitor enjoys her/his stay. Upon going back home the stress might set in again. Ana says: "Although eight months flew by fast, by the end of the exchange program I was feeling closely attached to friends I had made and the place I had come to call home, so when it came time to leave, I started feeling and little sad. The most difficult thing for me to give up was my sense of independence and living on my own but other than that, it is safe for me to say that my reverse culture shock was limited to missing persons, places and relationships I had grown accustomed to for the period of almost a year I spent living in a foreign country."

It may be called longing for the other nation. When the students were in the U.S., they missed home, but upon return, started missing the U.S. and looking forward to go back for another spell to renew their attachment.

It should be emphasized, that transnational visitor's condition is elusive. It creates a consciousness where it is not. It always seeks realization in being elsewhere. Cross-cultural relationships give opportunity to students to evaluate and compare both cultures. According to Nino Iakobishvili: "It took me some time after leaving the U.S. to realize everything from different perspective and realize all the causes that once seemed weird to me; create the image of the American character, their independence, and individuality that Georgians lack." While observing the cross-cultural relationships, Nino mentions the word "axiology", philosophical study of values, and says: "When two people from different countries interact they unintentionally get acquainted with one another's culture through exchanging values. This is what I would call cultural dialogues. Georgian-American cultural dialogue, axiology took place in highland of Svaneti. Khatia Chelidze misses the U.S., recalling the trip: "I had a very good trip with no incidents, now I have friends from all over the world, I experienced to be a part

of American lifestyle: took picture with the American school bus, went to do some shopping in the American shopping mall, my friends and I waited for the snow storm and our American friend came to visit and calm us down. Finally I want to thank everybody who was part of this unforgettable trip."

Conclusion

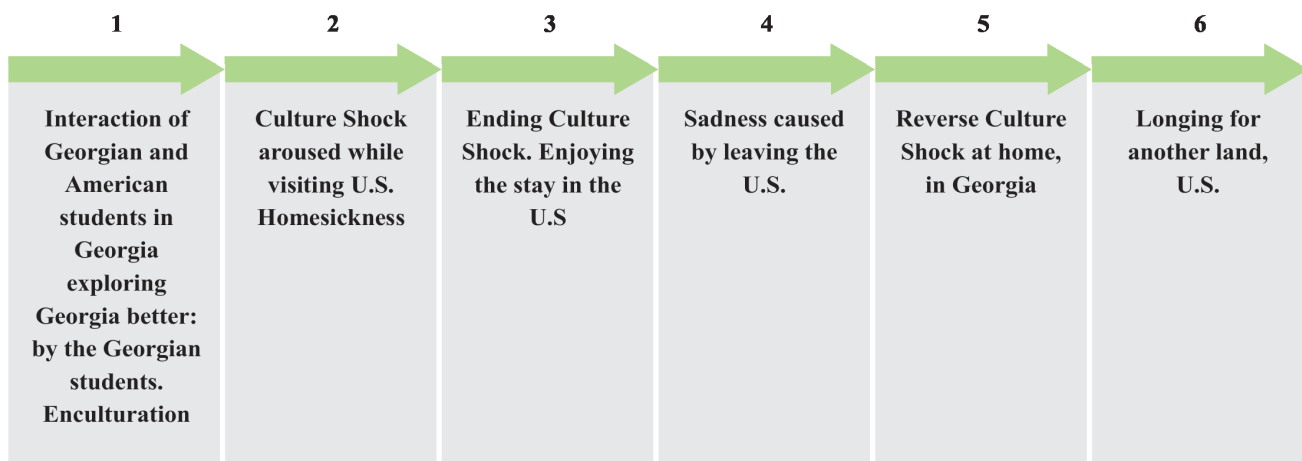
In conclusion we may say, that cross-cultural experience stirs up the settled subjectivity, constituted through dominant culture. The transnational condition orients it to the other enclosure, the other nation, and the elusive character of the cross-cultural visitor's condition is emanated. It creates a consciousness that exists where it is not. It seeks fulfillment in being elsewhere. We can make up a continuum of turbulent, discursive emotional phases, experienced by the IBSU American Studies department students starting from interaction with Americans at home, in Georgia, visiting U.S. and coming back to Georgia. (Table.1)

As for the intensity and rate of culture shock, or reverse culture shock, there is no one formula which is best to orient visitors, as each of us experiences different intensity of shock and develops individualistic coping strategies.

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Table.1



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