Revisiting the Cultural Identity Model: Sojourners on the Fringe

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This research explores the relationship between cultural identity and the readjustment process by revisiting the cultural identity model (Sussman 2000, 2002). This model proposes four identity shifts: affirmative, subtractive, additive, and global, each with a different repatriation outcome. Through in-depth interviews with Singaporean sojourners on their readjustment and consumption experiences, we examine how their cultural identities are negotiated, and also propose two more identity shifts. A resistive identity shift was identified when the sojourners displayed resistance to changes in the cultural environment. A marginal identity shift emerged when sojourners demonstrated no affinity to either the host or home cultures.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12385/volumes/v33/NA-33

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research explores the relationship between cultural identity and the readjustment process by revisiting the cultural identity model and its applications in the context of returning sojourners (Sussman 2000, 2002). The cultural adjustment to the foreign host culture and the phenomenon of “culture shock” has been well-researched (Adler 1975; Oberg 1960), but there has been relatively less literature on repatriation, readjustment to the home culture and the phenomenon of “reverse culture shock” (Adler 1981). While some studies have examined the identity projects of cosmopolitans (e.g., Thompson and Tambyah 1999), consumer researchers have focused on the longer-term acculturative processes for immigrant groups (e.g., Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994; Stayman and Deshpande 1989; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983).

Cultural identity is defined as the psychological counterpart to national identity. Where national identity is defined as one’s place of birth or country of origin, cultural identity is more aligned with who an individual perceives him/herself to be and the more specific cultural influences in his/her life (Costa and Bamossy 1995; Hall 1992). Based on the cultural identity model, there are four types of identity shifts: affirmative, subtractive, additive, and global, each with a different repatriation outcome. Sojourners with an affirmative identity shift possess positive feelings towards their own culture, and evaluate themselves as having a strong common bond with their compatriots. The cultural identity model predicts that sojourners with an affirmative identity shift would have low adaptation to the host country and low repatriation distress as they are the “grateful repatriates” who view the return home as positive. Subtractive identifiers would experience high adaptation to the host country and high repatriation distress upon return to the home culture. The high repatriation distress is due to identity loss with feelings of alienation from the home culture. They feel less positive about their home country and feel less in common with their compatriots. Similarly, additive identifiers would also experience high adaptation to the host country and high repatriation distress upon return to the home culture. However, high repatriation distress is due to embracing too many aspects of the host culture such as their values, customs, beliefs and social rituals. This additive shift is an identity gain whereby cultural identities have been sufficiently changed such that repatriation becomes a negative experience. Global identifiers experience high adaptation to the host country and moderate or low repatriation distress. They are often sojourners who have had multiple international experiences, and movements in and out of cultures only heighten the sense of belonging to a global community. On the whole, repatriation becomes a positive experience for them.

Data was collected via in-depth phenomenological interviews with fourteen Singaporean returning sojourners, ranging in age from 24 to 38 years who have spent at least two years overseas. Informants were asked about their sojourning experiences, cultural adjustment to their host countries, repatriation experiences, consumption experiences throughout their sojourn and repatriation, the meanings of home and what it means to be Singaporean. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed using the hermeneutic tradition. Generally, all of the informants expected some form of difficulty in returning home. Those whose actual experiences of coming home were more difficult than originally anticipated experienced a higher degree of repatriation distress. A positive motivation to come home overrides the initial discomfort and enables the sojourner to readily readjust back to life at home. Social support from the home culture can play an important role in helping these sojourners overcome reverse culture shock as well as provide the emotional attachment to Singapore.

The findings provided evidence for the four types of identity shifts as suggested by Sussman (2000, 2002). Sojourners with affirmative identity shifts exhibited a greater appreciation of their local culture (e.g., Singaporean cuisine, Asian values), while those with subtractive identity shifts expressed dissatisfaction with their quality of life after returning home. Sojourners with additive identity shifts shared examples of how they have appropriated various elements of their host cultures in terms of media consumption, adoption of new lifestyles, changes in value systems, etc. Others with a global identity shift attempted to re-create their own unique consumption experiences (e.g., American Thanksgiving with a Singaporean twist).

In addition to Sussman’s model, we propose two more identity shifts. A resistive identity shift was identified when the sojourners displayed resistance to changes in the cultural environment. A marginal identity shift emerged when sojourners demonstrated no affinity to either the host or home cultures. Sojourners with a weak sense of cultural identity may experience more negative identity shifts upon repatriation. The resistive and marginal identity shifts are differentiated from the subtractive identity shift by their more negative and subversive undertones. The resistive identity shift may be less problematic because over time, the sojourner may better manage his/her initial adaptation difficulties and ease back into life in the home culture. Like the additive and subtractive identifiers, someone who has experienced a marginal identity shift was a very adaptable person in the host country but who experienced a high level of repatriation distress. However, unlike those who have managed to find a mooring in identifying more with the host or home culture, a marginal sojourner has no affinity to either culture. This rootlessness may take a longer time to be resolved.

This research highlights the dynamic construction of cultural identity as sojourners negotiate both host and home cultures, underscoring the transformative effect that comes with a sojourn to a foreign culture. Although this research proposed two more identity shifts (i.e., the resistive and the marginal identity shifts), there could be other identity shifts as cultural identities become more malleable. Some informants may also display traits of different cultural identities. As the readjustment process varies for different individuals, a longitudinal study can be carried out to better trace the readjustment process and movements in cultural identity. It would be interesting to explore if sojourners may experience multiple cultural identity shifts over time as they readjust to their home cultures.

REFERENCES


