

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

The Role of Spiritual Development in the Cross-Cultural Reentry Adjustment of Missionaries

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Abstract

None available.

Headnote

This study investigated the relationship between spiritual development and cultural reentry adjustment in a group of missionaries. One hundred and two missionaries completed a questionnaire that correlated the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) with five cultural adaptation and transition scales. The study found significant relationship between the Reentry Distress Scale and the SAI Disappointment and Instability scales. There was also a significant relationship between the SAI Awareness scale and the Transition Change Scale. The study also explored the relationship between reentry distress and calling, regularly practicing spiritual disciplines, and returning home to a supportive community. The implications of the study are discussed in relation to missionaries, mission agencies, and local churches in order to provide meaningful care for missionaries during cross-cultural transitions.

The most recent statistics indicate that there are approximately 42,000 long-term missionaries from North America (including the U. S. and Canada) serving overseas (Jaffarian, 2008). These are defined as missionaries who have served overseas for more than four years, and include both traditional and bi-vocational missionaries (tentmakers). At some point, most of these missionaries will return to their home culture. While the successful transition from home culture to host culture has been the emphasis of training and research, more recent studies are affirming that the endpoint of the cultural transition cycle must include one's transition back to his or her home country. While much is understood about the challenges of learning to live overseas, researchers are discovering more about the challenges of reacclimating into one's home culture.

Many returning sojourners report feelings of isolation, confusion, and not feeling "at home" in their home culture. Previous studies have largely attempted to understand this phenomenon from a cultural identity perspective. Cultural identity is defined as the degree to which the sojourner identifies with his or her home country or country of sojourn (host country) (Sussman, 2002). While earlier studies focused primarily on culture shock and cultural adaptation, more recent studies tend to focus on the deeper issues of identity and multiculturalism (Onwumehili, Nwosu, Jackson & James-Hughes, 2003), including sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Ward Sc Kennedy, 1993), relationships (Martin, 1986), communication (Cox, 2004), multiple reacclimation (Onwumehili et al., 2003), and grief (Butcher, 2002). During reentry, there may be the discovery of changes in worldview (Butcher, 2002) and cultural identity (Sussman, 2000). Amidst the growing field of reacclimation studies, no research could be found that attempts to understand the role of one's relationship with God during reentry.

Missionaries and Cultural Adjustment

While research affirms that reentry stress is attributed to multiple variables and not any one single factor (Moore, Jones Sc Austin, 1987; Sussman, 2001), very few studies on spirituality and cross-cultural adjustment have been conducted. Studies comparing the acculturation patterns between missionaries and nonmissionaries in Nepal have found that missionaries register more direct contact with locals while other expats report less direct contact with nationals and higher levels of social support (Navara & James, 2002). Studies report that missionaries and non-missionaries cope and adjust with perceived stress in different ways. When missionaries perceive higher levels of stress, they are more inclined to engage in activities such as praying, seeking pastoral support, or trusting God to relieve the stress (Navara & James, 2005). Hall, Edwards and Hall (2006) found that spiritual development in missionaries is positively related to psychological development and other aspects of sociocultural adjustment.

Missionaries with lower levels of psychological development may be more vulnerable to the effects of spiritual difficulties during cross-cultural adjustment. Missionaries who regularly practice spiritual disciplines, experience support from their mission agency, have a clear vocational call and have greater spiritual life satisfaction also tend to experience greater adjustment to the mission field (Andrews, 1999). Further, missionaries who report better awareness of God also report better relationships with their teammates; conversely, those who exhibit lower levels of spiritual development are more prone to having difficulties while overseas (Barnett, Duvall, Edwards & Hall, 2005). Often, sojourners do not find the support and help needed to make the transition back to his or her home country, resulting in deep feelings of loss, grief, and even abandonment (Furuya, Stevens, Oddou, Bird & Mendenhall, 2007; Gaw, 2000; Selby et al., 2009). These feelings of grief are exacerbated by a loss of church community and a loss of spiritual connection with God (Selby, et al., 2009). Studies of returned short-term missionaries report that even those who have been overseas for as little as two weeks may experience many of the same feelings of reentry distress, as well as a renewed look at their own spirituality and sense of purpose in life (Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovic, & Gorton, 2006).

Deeper understanding of the sojourners relationship with God would provide vital insight into the experiences of missionaries who live cross-culturally for religious purposes. In order to address reentry more completely, it is necessary to understand how the returned missionary experiences his or her relationship with God. Of particular interest is whether the missionary is aware of God's presence and the quality of that relationship throughout the sojourn and reentry transition.

Summary and Hypotheses

Previous reentry research has provided important information about the sociocultural, psychological, and practical issues of cross-cultural adjustment. However, no studies could be found that attempt to understand the spiritual issues associated with cross-cultural reentry. Based on theoretical, theological, and empirical support, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between missionaries' relationship with God and cultural adaptation to the host country, acculturation to both home and host cultures, awareness of transition change, reentry preparedness, and reentry distress.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The target population for this study was long-term, U.S. Evangelical Protestant missionaries who had repatriated home to the U.S. Six mission agencies were randomly selected and invited to take part in this study. Of the six agencies, four were affiliated with a denomination, and two were not. The agencies ranged in size from 256 long-term missionaries to 4009 long-term missionaries, serving overseas. All agencies emphasized evangelism, discipleship, and church planting ministries. Each of the agencies was asked to identify missionaries according to the following criteria: (a) missionaries must have lived overseas for at least four years; (b) be over 21 years old; (c) have returned to the U.S. permanently and not be on any temporary assignment, furlough, study leave, or sabbatical; (d) have not returned to retire, but intend to continue working; (e) have been back in the U.S. more than six months but not longer than five years; (f) lived in the U.S. prior to living overseas, and consider the U.S. their home country. Agencies did not include missionaries who were asked to return home because of discipline, involuntary termination, or other personnel issues. A web-based questionnaire format was selected in order to facilitate research among a population scattered across the U.S.

The six participating agencies initially sent a combined total of 255 invitations to missionaries they determined met the criteria of the study. Of those, 13 were returned undeliverable and 10 missionaries informed their agencies that they did not qualify for the study, reducing the number to 232. There were 125 total responses for a response rate of 54%. Of those, 21 were incomplete and 2 exceeded the acceptable length of time back in the States. This yielded 102 usable responses. Respondents were not asked to identify their agency and all responses were collected and analyzed in a single batch.

Of the 102 qualified respondents, 62 (61%) were male and 40 (39%) were female. The majority of respondents (95) were married (93%), 5 were single (4%), and 2 were widowed (2%). Ages ranged from 32 to 69 with an average of 52 years. Data on ethnicity was not collected for this study, though all participants indicated that the U.S. is their home country. The average length of time overseas was 15 years, with a range of 4 to 36 years. Thirty-one (30%) of the respondents had been back in the U.S. for one year, 22 had been back for 2 years (21%), 20 had been back for 3 years (19%), 16 had been back for 4 years (15%) and 13 had been back for 5 years (12%). Forty-one had served in Europe (40%), 30 had served in Asia (29%), 16 in Latin America (15%), 13 in Africa (12%) and 2 in the Middle East (2%). While living overseas, 55 (53%) lived in a metropolis (more than 1,000,000 people), 12 (11%) lived in a large city (500,000 to 1,000,000 people), 1 (10%) in a town, 9 (8%) in a small city (50,000 to 100,000), 9 (8%) in a village and 6 (5%) in a medium city (100,000 to 500,000).

Measures

The research questionnaire was comprised of six instruments, which had been used in similar studies. Five additional questions were developed by the researcher as a result of a theological study connected with this research.

Spiritual Assessment Inventory. The Spiritual Assessment Inventory (Hall Sc Edwards, 1996) is a measure of spirituality based on object relations theory and contemplative spirituality literature. The instrument includes 54 self-report items scored on a 5-point scale in which 1 is "not at all true" and 5 is "very true." A high score indicates the presence of the trait being measured. The SAI is designed to measure spiritual maturity based on two dimensions of one's relationship with God. The first, Awareness of God, relates to a person's ability to be aware of God's presence in his or her life. The second dimension, Quality of Relationship, is measured by four subscales: Instability, Grandiosity, Realistic Acceptance, and Disappointment. The Impression Management subscale was added later as a means of addressing a person's test-taking attitude, and is helpful in identifying illusory spiritual health. In previous studies, each of the subscales demonstrated good internal reliability (alpha scores between 0.73-0.95). In the current study, all scales except one demonstrated good reliability with alpha scores ranging from 0.77 to .094. Only the Grandiosity scale was a little low with a 0.61 reliability rating and did not yield any significant relationships with the other scales. Replication studies have correlated the SAI with other instruments thus supporting the construct validity of the subscales. These include the Bell Object Relations Inventory (Bell, 1991), the Intrinsic/Extrinsic- Revised (Gorsuch Sc McPherson, 1989), the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Emmons, 1984, 1987), and the Defense Style Questionnaire-40 (Andrews et al. 1993).

Sociocultural Adaptation Scale. The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Ward Sc Kennedy, 1999) is a 29-item questionnaire that assesses the skills needed to manage the everyday aspects of living in a new culture. It has been found to be particularly useful for research in investigating both psychological and sociocultural aspects of cross-cultural adaptation. The original instrument (Searle Sc Ward, 1990) was based on Furnham and Bochner's (1982) Social Situations Questionnaire. It included 16 items that assessed intercultural competence and the behavioral aspects of cross-cultural adaptation (e.g., "making friends," "using the transport system" and "going shopping") as well as other areas of adaptation such as "finding food you enjoy" and "dealing with the climate." The more recent version also explores cognitive domains ("understanding the political system," "taking a host country perspective on the culture"). The self-report instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 indicates "no difficulty" and 5 indicates "extreme difficulty." Lower scores indicate a higher level of cultural adaptation to the host country. The SCAS has demonstrated good reliability in previous studies with alpha scores of 0.75 to 0.91, ($\alpha = 0.91$ in this study).

Acculturation Index. The Acculturation Index (Ward Sc Kennedy, 1999) measures two dimensions of acculturation: the sojourner's relationship to his or her culture of origin (home culture) and to the culture of contact (host culture). By evaluating these two realms, four acculturation strategies may be identified: both home culture maintenance and intergroup (host) relations; home culture maintenance; intergroup relations; and neither home nor host culture relations. Respondents are asked to consider two questions about their current lifestyle: "Are your experiences and behaviors similar to other Americans?" and "Are your experiences and behaviors similar to people in your country of missionary service?" Respondents rate the 21 cognitive and behavioral items on a 7-point scale measuring how similar their personal preferences and characteristics are to his or her home culture and host culture. The questions reflect items of everyday life including "clothing," "pace of life," and "food," as well as deeper issues such as "worldview," "self-identity," and "political ideology." Lower scores indicate lower cultural identification while higher scores reflect higher cultural identification. In previous studies, the instrument has proved highly reliable in both home culture and host culture identification with alpha scores ranging from 0.89 to 0.96. Alpha scores in the current study were 0.93 and 0.90.

Transition Change Scale. The Transition Change Scale (Sussman, 2002) is a 4-question scale designed to measure the overall change in cultural identity experienced by the sojourner after returning to his or her home culture. Transition change is built on the notion of the sojourner's perception of self-change through their interaction with host nationals. Subjects respond on a 7-point scale (1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 7 indicates "strongly agree") to questions such as "I feel as though I changed as a result of living and working overseas" and "I have tried to incorporate some international customs and ways of thinking into my work environment." Higher scores indicate greater change as a result of the international sojourn. The scale has proved reliable in previous studies ($\alpha = 0.88$). An alpha of 0.64 in the current study is a little low, which may be the result of a small number of items in the scale. Scale reliability may be improved by increasing the number of items (Salkind, 2008).

Repatriation Preparedness Scale. The Repatriation Preparedness Scale (Sussman, 2001) is a 10-item scale used to assess the sojourners psychological preparedness for returning to the home culture. Participants are asked to think back to the time period immediately prior to returning home from living overseas. On a 7-point scale (1 = "strongly agree"; 7 = "strongly disagree") subjects respond to statements such as "I expected that coming home to the U. S. after an overseas assignment would be difficult," and "I felt comfortable saying goodbye to my host country friends." Lower scores indicate less psychological preparedness for returning home while higher scores indicate a greater degree of psychological preparedness. In previous studies, the RPS has reported alpha coefficients ranging from 0.66 to 0.75 ($\alpha = 0.66$ in the current study). Reliability was improved by eliminating one question ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Repatriation Distress Scale. The Repatriation Distress Scale (Sussman, 2001) is a 4-item scale used to assess psychological discomfort experienced by sojourners after returning to their home country. The scale was developed through the author's Cultural Identity Model of cross-cultural transitions, based on the theory that a weak home cultural identity

results in greater repatriation distress while a strong home cultural identity would likely be associated with lower repatriation distress. The scale measures the psychological aspects of reentry through statements such as "I feel lonely or have homesick feelings for the overseas country/assignment," or "I am more anxious and irritable since I returned home." Participants respond on a 7-point scale with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree." Higher scores indicate a greater level of repatriation distress. The RDS has been used in several studies and proved reliable with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.80 ($\alpha = 0.81$ in the current study).

Additional questions. Five additional questions were developed from a theological study associated with this research and were added by the researcher to the instrument. These explored sojourners' experiences of calling, relationship with God, practicing spiritual disciplines, and being received home by their community. Participants responded on a 6-point scale (1 indicating they "disagree strongly" while 6 indicates that they "agree strongly") to the following statements: "I felt called by God to go to the mission field"; "I felt called by God to return to my home country from the mission field"; "During my reentry transition, I felt secure in my relationship with God"; "During my reentry transition, practicing spiritual disciplines (i.e., prayer, Bible reading, etc.) was a regular part of my life"; and "I came home to a supportive community." Because these were analyzed as single-item measures, Cronbach alpha measures for reliability were not applied and must be considered in generalizing the results.

Results

Correlation statistics were performed on all scales in order to discover relationships between the SAI and all cultural adjustment scales (Table 1) and between the researcher-designed questions and all cultural adjustment scales (Table 2). Several significant relationships were found.

In regard to relationship with God and transition change, the results showed a positive correlation between the TCS and SAI Awareness scale ($r = .30, p = .002$), indicating that missionaries who were aware of God's presence during their reentry transition also reported a greater awareness of change in themselves. The results also showed significant relationships between the TCS and two researcher-designed questions: "During my reentry transition, I felt secure in my relationship with God" ($r = .32, p = .001$), and "During my reentry transition, practicing spiritual disciplines was a regular part of my life" ($r = .25, p = .010$). Conversely, there was a negative relationship between the AIHome scale and regularly practicing spiritual disciplines ($r = -.25, p = .01$), indicating that during the reentry transition missionaries who maintained a stronger home culture identity did not practice spiritual disciplines as frequently as those who reported a stronger host culture identity.

Regarding relationship with God and reentry distress, this study found significant relationships between the RDS and SAI Disappointment ($r = .28, p = .005$) and SAI Instability ($r = .20, p = .039$), indicating that missionaries who experienced a greater degree of reentry distress also experienced greater levels of disappointment with God and instability in their relationship with God. The SAI Impression Management scale showed a positive relationship with the AIHost ($r = .21, p = .028$) and a negative relationship with the SCAS ($r = -.24, p = .012$). The RDS also showed a significant relationship with the statement, "I came home to a supportive community" ($r = -.37, p = .000$), indicating that those who experienced a greater degree of reentry distress also reported lower levels of community support. The study also found that 57% of the respondents indicated that they returned to a supportive community, while 43% indicated they did not return to a supportive community.

Regarding relationship with God and reentry preparedness, none of the SAI scales showed significant correlations with the RPS. However, the correlation between the RPS and calling home from the mission field showed a positive relationship ($r = .36, p = .000$), indicating that missionaries who had a greater sense of calling home from the mission field tend to prepare for the reentry transition. While 99% of the respondents indicated that they felt called by God to go to the mission field, responses to the statement, "I felt called by God to return home from the mission field," were much more mixed. Most indicated that they felt a sense of calling, (strongly agree = 37%; agree = 23%; agree somewhat = 12%), yet 26% indicated that they did not feel a sense of calling to return home (disagree somewhat = 10%; disagree = 7%; strongly disagree = 7%).

Given the number of variables correlated, to reduce the risk of Type I errors, a standard multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to test the hypotheses (Table 3). The findings were similar to the Pearson product-moment analyses.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that relationship with God is a significant factor in the reentry adjustment of missionaries. This study found that missionaries who were aware of changes in themselves during the reentry transition also reported an awareness of God's presence and that they felt secure in their relationship with God. Additionally, these missionaries also reported that they regularly practiced spiritual disciplines during the cross-cultural transition. Previous studies have found a relationship between awareness of God and spiritual well-being, especially in one's satisfaction in relationship with God (Andrews, 1999). While the relationship among these variables should be explored further, these findings could be an important key in understanding the role of relationship with God in accepting the changes in oneself during cross-cultural transitions, as well as the importance of intentionally cultivating that relationship through the practice of the spiritual disciplines.

Conversely, this study found significant correlations between reentry distress and feelings of disappointment with God and instability in relationship with God. The SAI Disappointment scale may reflect excessive and unrealistic demands of God (Hall & Edwards, 2002), while the Instability scale measures the degree to which people have difficulty trusting God and viewing him as loving. The combination of these variables may reflect an unstable relationship with God and a fear of rejection (Hall & Edwards, 2002), and it may indicate the potential vulnerability of the returning sojourner.

Missionaries who reported higher levels of reentry distress also indicated they did not return home to a supportive community. Previous studies have found the need for community support in all stages of the overseas experience (Furuya et al., 2007; Werkman, 1986). More recent studies among faith-based agencies have found a relationship between organizational support and perceived support from God (Eriksson et al., 2009).

Missionaries who feel called by God to return to their home country also report a greater degree of preparedness to return to their home country. Sojourner studies have emphasized the need for reentry training and realistic expectations about the reentry experience (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985; Krapels & Davis, 2005; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Wang, 1997). Additionally, preparation for reentry has been found to reduce the effects of reentry distress (Forster, 1994; Sussman, 2001). This finding suggests an important link between the missionary's sense of calling and preparing for the transition from host country to home country.

There are several limitations that must be considered in generalizing the findings to a larger population. First, while a 54% total response rate and a 44% usable response rate is somewhat typical for sojourner studies, the percentages are such that the findings may be limited in their generalizability. Second, there is need for cautious and limited acceptance of findings related to researcher-designed questions. Questions 114 to 118 in the survey were developed from the theological study as part of this research. Each of these correlates a single question with an entire scale. In the cases where the findings were significant, they must be accepted with appropriate caution. Further research could explore each of these variables more fully. Third, because of the particular sample demographics, the findings may not necessarily generalize to other populations.

Implications for Missionaries

Missionaries who report a greater awareness of God's presence and security in that relationship also reported a greater awareness of the changes that had occurred in themselves during the sojourn and reentry experience. This study found significant relationships between practicing spiritual disciplines and feeling secure in relationship with God during the reentry transition. Andrews (1999) found that a vital spiritual life among missionaries was nurtured through the regular practice of spiritual disciplines and the awareness of their calling from God. The consistent practice of spiritual disciplines, including prayer, Bible reading, fasting, worship, retreat, solitude, silence, etc., may enhance one's awareness of God's presence throughout the sojourn and reentry transition, thereby providing much-needed stability during a potentially turbulent time.

Missionaries who reported feeling called home from the mission field also reported a higher degree of preparedness for the reentry transition. This suggests the importance for missionaries to assess their reasons for making such a transition. It may be helpful to further investigate how prayer, silence, solitude, reading God's Word, spiritual direction, and counseling play a role in discerning God's leading. Preparation for reentry transition has been found to alleviate reentry distress, while lack of preparation has been found to exacerbate difficulties in reentry (Forster, 1994; Sussman, 2001). Therefore, prior to reentry it is helpful for missionaries to intentionally cultivate an awareness of God's presence through regular practice of spiritual disciplines including prayer, meditation, and spiritual direction, in order to discern God's particular leading in the reentry transition.

Implications for Mission Agencies

The implications for mission agencies suggest the need to provide adequate support throughout the sojourn and reentry transition. Mission agencies frequently provide specialized training to prepare the missionary for a life of service and ministry in a foreign context, as well as on-going training and support while on the field. The findings of this study suggest the importance of providing additional training that familiarizes the returning missionary with the unique challenges of reentering their home culture. Training topics should include the practical, cultural, and psychological challenges of reentry as well as the importance of growing in one's awareness of God and deepening in one's relationship with God throughout the reentry transition. If possible, it is best if some aspects of training could be covered before the missionary has left the host country in order to help them plan their goodbyes and to leave in a positive and healthy way. In addition, debriefing with field staff and home staff should take place as soon as possible after the missionary returns.

Further, it would be helpful for mission agencies to continue providing missionary care to their returned missionaries throughout the entirety of the reentry transition. This includes access to missionary care providers who are familiar with the challenges of transition and are trained to deal with the unique issues missionaries face. Periodic follow up with missionary care providers, spiritual directors, and mission agency staff who have been through reentry, may provide both practical and spiritual support during the season of transition. Mission agencies serve a vital role in providing these resources for their missionaries not only to enhance their ministry potential but their own personal spiritual growth and vitality.

Implications for Local Churches

While the mission agency is often the legal employer of the missionary and has an important role in missionary care, the local church is typically the place of immediate contact where the missionary finds a place of community. Previous studies have shown the need for events designed to receive the returning sojourner back into the community (Werkman, 1986), commemorating the completion of one stage of life and the beginning of a new stage. Because of the nature of cross-cultural transitions, it is suggested that such welcoming events take place as close to the time of reentry as possible (Pirólo, 2000). Airport greetings, welcome home parties, and reports to mission boards are important moments of re-bonding between the missionary and his or her community.

Returned missionaries may have unique spiritual needs that require special care during reentry. Feelings of disappointment with God, disconnection from one's culture and community, grief, and loss of ministry are common. These needs may be met through spiritual direction, counseling, and pastoral nurture through the reentry transition. Returned missionaries may need a safe person with whom to talk about the challenges and stresses of resettling in their home country, as well as the joys and stresses from their time of ministry overseas. Along with providing for the immediate practical needs of returned missionaries, it is helpful for churches to be aware of the deep emotional and spiritual challenges many missionaries struggle with upon arrival in their home country.

The returning missionary who is received by a supportive and loving community of faith may reasonably expect to experience lower levels of reentry distress as well as a more healthful reentry transition, being reestablished in a community of faith, giving to others through meaningful ministry, and deepening relationships and meaningful roles in his or her community.

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AuthorAffiliation

Thomas R. Kimber

Biola University

AuthorAffiliation

Author Information

KIMBER, THOMAS. Email: tomJkimber@biola.edu. Title: Former missionary with Evangelical Free Church of America; Adjunct Professor (Christian Ministry and Leadership, Biblical and Theological Studies) at Talbot School of Theology. Degrees: BA (English), University of Redlands; MDIV, Talbot School of Theology; PhD, Talbot School of Theology.

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