

Sharon M. Maybarduk, a U.S. Foreign Service spouse and 2008 graduate of the Smith College School for Social Work with a Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work, shares a brief description of her thesis research study titled, “An Exploration of Factors Associated with Reentry Adjustment of U.S. Foreign Service Spouses”, with the following study abstract.

This study was undertaken to provide information about U.S. Foreign Service spouse reentry adjustment in the published social work literature. The purpose is to inform social workers and others working with spouses and repatriates regarding the reentry phenomenon and to inform the development of intervention strategies in working with repatriates and their families in other occupations requiring extended overseas stays.

One hundred fifty-eight Foreign Service spouses who are members of the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW), a Foreign Service spouse organization, responded to a mixed method questionnaire covering a range of reentry issues. These issues included demographic characteristics, and traits of the spouses’ last overseas assignment and last reentry experience.

There were three clusters of quantitative findings: primary were the family systems factors, with greater reentry adjustment difficulties for younger spouses with fewer and younger children; overseas adjustment factors, with more reentry difficulties for spouses who participated in fewer activities overseas; and reentry factors, with greater readjustment distress for spouses whose reentry experience was more difficult than anticipated, those with less job satisfaction, and those who had been in the U.S. for a shorter period of time. Qualitative results from short answer questions found: the return to familiar surroundings makes subsequent reentries easier, and more reentry information before reentry and the availability of counseling to those at risk would be helpful.

STUDY FINDINGS

This study is designed to explore singular or clusters of factors which may influence the difficulty or ease of the reentry process by looking at spouses in the context of the external structures and demands with which they negotiate their lives. The findings include primary source information of the challenges of being a Foreign Service spouse reentering the U.S., and how spouses manage and act as co-constructors of their lives.

The primary research question in this study is, “What factors are associated with the reentry adjustment of U.S. Foreign Service spouses?” Research sub-questions were generated to help organize an understanding of the results. The sub-questions are:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of the sample?
2. What relationship exists between the demographic characteristics and their reentry adjustment?
3. What relationship exists between specified nondemographic sample characteristics and reentry adjustment?
4. Are reentries distressful for Foreign Service spouses?

The results of this study are both quantitative and qualitative. As the primary findings are quantitative, they are reported first, followed later in this chapter by the qualitative findings.

Overall Study Findings

The quantitative results are divided into descriptive and relational findings. The descriptive findings are one-variable results which describe the sample, and include demographic and nondemographic independent variables (which apply to both overseas and reentry experiences), and the dependent variable, reentry adjustment, as measured by the 20 items on the Homecomer Culture Shock Scale, designed by Fray (1988) in his

dissertation studying the reentry of missionaries. The relational findings for this study are composed of the associations and correlations found between two variables, for example age and return culture shock, and provide information about associations found between them, such as when age goes up (older), does culture shock increase or decrease?

Descriptive Findings

- The demographic characteristics of the sample were: primarily female, Caucasian, 62.5 (mean) years of age, highly educated, married to an Foreign Service Officer (FSO) for 25.8 (mean) years, with an average of 2.32 children each; 40% were working, 30% were volunteering and 10% were retired fulltime at the time of the study.
- The nondemographic characteristics of the sample at their last overseas assignment were: primarily satisfied with their last overseas assignment, participated often in activities, almost 80% volunteered and 45% were employed, and of those who worked, most were satisfied with their jobs. Prior to their return to the U.S., most had not received reentry information.
- The nondemographic characteristics of the sample at reentry showed the majority (80%) had experience with previous reentries, while 20% were on their first reentry. 50% of the sample had been back in the U.S. for a long time, 10 or more years, and one-quarter had been back for a shorter time, three years or less. One-half had young children and adolescents at reentry, and the other half had older children. They quickly became involved in their new lives, with two-thirds

locating employment and volunteer work within the first six months, and 80% reported a high level of satisfaction with their jobs.

- The reliability statistics showed that the Cronbach's Alpha for the Total Scale of the HCSS, which measures Culture Shock (CS), is .943. This compares favorably with the Cronbach's Alpha of the CS scale used by Huffman (1989) of .92.
- The reentry culture shock (known as reverse culture shock or reentry adjustment difficulty) for the sample was low, with a mean level of culture shock at 35.67 on a scale of 20 – 100. This means that the level of reentry distress for this sample was halfway between slight to moderate on the HCSS scale (Fray, 1988).

Relational Findings

- Age and Culture Shock. A younger group of spouses ages 20's-40's had more culture shock than an older group ages 50-70's and above.
- Time as a Foreign Service Spouse and Culture Shock. Spouses who had been married to a FSO for a shorter period of time had more culture shock in reentry than those who had been married for a longer period of time.
- Number of Children and Culture Shock. Spouses with more children were found to have less culture shock than spouses with fewer children.
- Ages of Children at Reentry and Culture Shock. Spouses with older children had less culture shock than spouses with young children.
- Participation in Specific Activities Overseas and Culture Shock. Spouses who participated more in certain activities overseas (embassy activities, hosted representational events, attended representational events, and made friends and

interacted with the embassy community) had less culture shock than those who participated less in these activities.

- Participation in General Activities Overseas and Culture Shock. Spouses who participated in more activities in general, including embassy, representational, expatriate community activities and interacted with host country nationals, had lower culture shock in reentry than those who participated less in these activities.
- Length of Time Since Reentry and Culture Shock. Spouses who had been in the U.S. for less than 24 months had a higher level of culture shock than those who had been in the U.S. for more than 24 months.
- Obtained Information After Reentry and Culture Shock. Spouses who obtained reentry information after reentry experienced more culture shock than those who did not receive such information after reentry.
- Reentry Experience More Difficult Than Expected and Culture Shock. Spouses who stated their last reentry was more difficult than expected had more culture shock than those who stated their reentry was not more difficult than expected.

Qualitative Findings

- The first reentries are the most difficult - the later reentries are less difficult.
- The challenge in later reentries is dealing with family readjustment to reentry.
- The return to familiar surroundings makes subsequent reentries easier.
- The Foreign Service lifestyle has pros and cons; friendships made overseas are missed the most.
- The final reentry before retirement is also very difficult.
- More information about reentry is needed.

- Counseling or additional support should be made available for spouses and families.

Specific Study Findings

The following section covers the descriptive, relational, and qualitative findings of this study in greater detail.

Descriptive Findings

Descriptive Demographic Findings

The sample is primarily female (154 female, 4 male), mostly U.S. born and raised (74.9% compared with 16.5% foreign born and 8.9% born and raised in the U.S. and overseas), ranging in age from 29 to 97 years of age, and the distribution somewhat skewed to an older population, with a sample mean of 62.5 years of age. They are primarily Caucasian (144 participants, 91.1% of the sample) with smaller representations of African American (3), Hispanic (6), Asian/Pacific Islander (5) and Hispanic American (1). As a group they are highly educated with 86.6% having a college or higher degree, married to a Foreign Service Officer for an average (mean) of 25.8 years (mean), with an average (mean) of 2.32 children per spouse. At the time of the study, 40% of the sample worked and 30% volunteered, with 20% retired and 10% unemployed.

Membership demographic data are not tabulated by the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW), nor is data on spouses tabulated by the U.S. Department of State. However, the data gained from this study is thought to be reflective of the membership (AAFSW, 2007). The general Foreign Service spouse population, however, is thought to be younger in age, higher in the percentage of males

(estimated at 15-20%) and more diverse in racial/ethnic background, as a larger number of younger, female and minority FSOs have been hired in recent years (FLO, 2007). These demographics are different from most previous reentry studies, in part by intent, as spouses and not employees were being studied, and by definition they are married, which is different from most studies done on singles populations, such as high school and college students, overseas teachers, and missionary children. The sample also includes male and female spouses not found in previous reentry research, and collected data on racial/ethnic background of participants, found only in Gaw (2000). The sample demographics by average age for this sample was older (62.5) compared to the American business executives and spouses studied by Black and Gregersen (1991), who averaged 41 years in age.

Descriptive Nondemographic Findings

Overseas. The descriptive nondemographic findings of the sample while overseas showed a majority of the participants were mostly or completely satisfied with their last overseas assignment (79.1%), despite the fact that a small majority (51%) were assigned to hardship posts. The largest proportion of the sample (32.9%) was last assigned overseas to Europe and Eurasia.

The findings also showed that the spouses were socially active as a group while overseas, with the majority “always or most of the time” participating in activities with host country nationals and other foreigners. It was only in one of the activity areas, the participation in embassy and embassy community activities, that the spouses’ rated themselves as less active. They were also active in terms of employment and volunteering overseas. While on their last overseas assignment, 79.1% volunteered and

of the 58.1% sought employment, 79.6% were employed. Further, those who were employed were completely or mostly satisfied with their jobs (78.5%) and/or their volunteer work (89.3%). These statistics are helpful to social work practitioners and others working with other spouses in reentry, to look at the impact of what spouses do when overseas and its possible relationship to their reentry adjustment.

Reentry. The descriptive nondemographic findings of the sample during their reentry showed that most (78.3%) did not receive reentry information prior to their last return. Of those who did receive information, less than half (42.1%) of the information came from the Community Liaison Office (CLO) at overseas posts or the Family Liaison Office in Washington, both of which are charged with assisting spouses and families. The sample indicated that most had experienced reentry before, with 80% having had 2-9 reentries, and 20% on their first reentry. One-quarter of the sample had been back in the U.S. for three years or less and a large number had been back for over 10 years (50%). The sample also indicated that at the time of the last reentry, approximately 50% had young children or adolescents, and approximately 50% had children who were being launched or were grown and gone.

As was true overseas, most had become involved in volunteer work and/or employment soon after their last reentry. Almost two-thirds (63.3%) engaged in volunteer work, and of these, almost two-thirds (64%) began volunteering within their first 6 months back and 84% volunteered within their first year back. In addition, almost two-thirds sought employment (63.3%), and of these, 92.2% obtained employment. They found employment relatively quickly, with 65.3% of those seeking employment obtaining it within the first 6 months and 82.1% obtaining it within the first year back in the U.S.

Further, of those who sought employment, most were employed in their field of interest (83.3%) and 80.9% said they were completely or mostly satisfied with those jobs.

Descriptive Findings: The HCSS Culture Shock Scale Frequencies

HCSS mean. The descriptive, or frequency, findings for the Homecomer Culture Shock Scale (HCSS) (Fray, 1988), the measure used in this study to determine reentry adjustment (also known as homecomer culture shock, reverse culture shock, reentry distress), showed that reentry distress was relatively low for the sample of Foreign Service spouses.

The HCSS utilizes a likert-type scale for 20 items to determine whether the aspect of culture shock being measured pertained to the respondents during their first 6 months of their last reentry. The scale ranges from “Not True of Me”, which is equal to a score of 1, to “Very True of Me”, which is equal to a score of 5. The possible range in each respondent’s answers, then, for the 20 items is from 20 to 100. The range of frequencies on the HCSS (the sum of all items) in this sample is 20 to 96. The mean of all HCSS items was 35.67, which shows that the level of overall reentry adjustment difficulty and distress was in the slight to moderate range.

Relational Findings

Demographic Associations with Reentry Adjustment

The demographic factors found to be associated with reentry adjustment were age, the number of months as a Foreign Service spouse, the number of children spouses had at reentry and the ages of the first 1-3 children upon reentry. There was no association found between those who were US, foreign born, or born and raised in the US and

overseas and between gender or racial/ethnic differences in terms of their reentry adjustment.

Some demographic variables were not analyzed: whether a spouse was currently living overseas or not, his/her current marital status, and his/her level of education, as by definition the sample was married, they were a highly educated group, and whether they were currently living in the US or overseas was not related to their previous reentry adjustment.

Nondemographic Associations with Reentry Adjustment

The nondemographic factors found to be statistically significant associations with reentry adjustment were: the degree of participation in activities overseas, the length of time since reentry, the amount of job satisfaction in reentry, the difference in reentry expectations vs. experience, and information received after reentry.

Participation in activities overseas. The eight activities measured in this study are as follows:

Activity 1: Participated in embassy activities.

Activity 2: Participated in activities in expatriate organizations.

Activity 3: Hosted representational events.

Activity 4: Attended representational events.

Activity 5: Interacted with host country nationals.

Activity 6: Interacted with the larger expatriate community.

Activity 7: Made friends and interacted mainly with the embassy community.

Activity 8: Made an effort to learn as much as possible about local overseas culture and society.

Study results indicated a positive weak correlation at the .05 level of significance was found between the following activities and reentry adjustment: Activity 1 (participation in embassy activities), Activity 3 (hosted representational events), Activity 4 (attended representational events) and Activity 7 (made friends and interacted mainly with the embassy community). As the activity level was reverse scored, a positive correlation between these four activities and culture shock means that as participation in these activities overseas goes down, reentry culture shock goes up. There was no significant correlation found between the other four activities and culture shock.

The meaning of this finding is:

- the LESS the spouses participated in embassy activities overseas
- the LESS they hosted representational events
- the LESS they attended representational events
- the LESS they made friends and interacted mainly with the embassy community
- the MORE culture shock they experienced on reentry.

This finding also shows no statistical correlation between the following and reentry culture shock:

- the participation level in activities in expatriate organizations
- the amount spouses interacted with host country nationals
- the amount they interacted with the larger expatriate community
- the amount they made an effort to learn about overseas culture/society

The sum of the respondents' participation levels in all eight activities was found to have a positive correlation to reentry culture shock at the .05 level of significance, in which the chances of this being incorrect are 5 in 100. A positive correlation means the

more participation in the total group of activities, the lower the return culture shock, since the activities were reverse scored.

Time since reentry. A significant negative relationship was found between the length of time since reentry and homecomer culture shock. The results showed that participants who had been in the U.S. for less than 24 months had more culture shock than those in the U.S. for 24 months or longer.

Cultural identity. A significant relationship was found between cultural identity and reverse culture shock in two out of the three items of the Sussman (2001) Cultural Identity Change scale. Results showed a higher mean rank (more culture shock) for those who responded “Yes” to the statement, “In some ways I feel/felt ‘less’ American than I did before my spouse’s international assignment(s)” than those who responded “No”.

The second question on the Sussman Culture Identity Change Scale (Sussman, 2001) had a similar result. Spouses who responded “Yes” to the statement, “I feel/felt more a part of a host culture I lived in than a part of the U.S. culture” had a higher mean rank (more culture shock) than those who responded “No”.

However, the third Sussman Culture Identity Change item, “I feel/felt that I am/was a more global or international person after my spouse’s assignment” did not show a significant difference in culture shock between those who responded “Yes” and those who responded “No”, when a Mann-Whitney U Test was run. In the descriptive findings for this statement, however, there were considerably more who responded “Yes” to this statement; but changing to a more international person did not appear to be a significant factor in spouses’ reentry adjustment.

Obtained information after reentry. A Mann-Whitney U test of ranks was run to determine the relationship between spouses who obtained reentry information post-reentry vs. those who had not, and culture shock. It was found that those who obtained information after reentry had a higher mean rank (more culture shock) than those who had not received information after reentry. At first this appears counterintuitive, but those who received information after reentry were those who recognized they needed help and sought it out after reentry. This shows that despite receiving information after reentry, they still struggled with the problems of reentry, and indicates that information may be more helpful if received prior to reentry.

Job satisfaction after reentry. Results showed a weak positive correlation between job satisfaction and reentry culture shock. As job satisfaction was reverse-scored, this means as job dissatisfaction increased, culture shock increased.

Reentry experience more difficult than expected. A Mann Whitney U test found a significant difference in culture shock by whether reentry was more difficult than expected. Participants who responded “Yes” reentry was more difficult than expected, had a higher mean rank, meaning greater culture shock.

Qualitative Findings (short answer questions)

The qualitative findings in this study are the responses provided by the participants to two short answer questions. In the first question, the spouses were asked to describe their reentry experience in their own words; in the second, they were asked what the State Department could do to help with the reentry of Foreign Service spouses and families. Their responses cover four topic areas: the first reentries are the most difficult, the challenge in later reentries is dealing with family reentry adjustment, the

return to familiar surroundings makes subsequent reentries easier, and the Foreign Service lifestyle has pros and cons, with friendships missed the most, and the final reentry in retirement is also difficult. The researcher has utilized content analysis to derive these major findings.

These are the voices of 158 Foreign Service spouses who have given many years of combined service to the U.S. government's foreign policy interest abroad and at home. They range from 29 to 97 years old and represent up to 75 years of State Department history. Each one is a person speaking from her/his own experience, the person in their environment, providing information on how understanding and constructive change can be brought to the larger State department system within which they operate.

Description of reentries

The first (early) reentries are the most difficult – the later reentries are easier.

The sample indicated that their first reentries, done earlier in their career, were more difficult than their later reentries after the experience of several returns. Examples of this perspective follow:

“This last reentry was okay, but the previous one (my first) was harder, especially with a 4 year old and feeling lonely and isolated. The older I have gotten, and the longer in the Foreign Service, the easier my reentry has been”.

The first reentry was considered more difficult as the spouses had not known what to expect:

“The first time we came back was the hardest. There was so much we had to do that we didn't expect and we didn't know how to get it done. This was my seventh reentry and it wasn't so bad – you know what you have to do and just go get it done.”

“After the first reentry, you know what to expect”.

The first reentry was also considered more difficult due to a lack of sense of community and support they had felt overseas. The result for some was loneliness and depression:

“I remember feeling lonely, bored, depressed at times. No one understood our lifestyle or cared about it. That included extended family.”

“I was depressed and lonely for at least a year. I needed support, but it was hard to be assertive and ask for it when you are emotionally thrown off course.”

The first reentry was considered difficult due to the cost of living and range of choices found in the U.S.

“Reentry the first time was very difficult, from comfortable overseas living to reduced income and masses of expensive merchandise offered and needed”.

“Choices were the most difficult to get used to. So many decisions to do anything. I went to take a break from decisions (housing, tires, cereal, soap) and asked for a soda at an ice cream parlor and burst into tears when the person asked me, “Large? Medium? Small? For here or to go? With syrup or without?”

The challenge in later reentries is dealing with family readjustment to reentry.

The spouses indicated that in later reentries, they were coping with their family members’ readjustment difficulties more than their own. The difficulties of adolescent and employee spouse reentry adjustments were mentioned most often:

“My reentry was fine, but my daughter’s was difficult, returning as a high school junior. She had to make all new friends, whereas overseas everyone is a new kid on the block and accepted right away”.

“Coping with my husband’s ‘hard landing’ and depression for 9 months was very stressful”.

“It was difficult for me to watch our teenager try to adjust, and, then, my husband, who felt stifled by the bureaucracy and missed the interaction with foreign nationals”.

The return to familiar surroundings makes subsequent reentries easier. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that a major part of handling reentry distress was returning to familiarity:

“We moved back to DC and a family home, in a neighborhood where we had many friends”.

“This was not a difficult reentry as we were previously established in home, community and church”.

However, those who had not returned to familiarity reported a more difficult reentry:

“We were thrown into an unknown city (Miami) without any help. I feel very lonely and I want to leave as soon as possible”.

“Dealing with family, school, finding a house, getting around a new city, and startling a new job all at once is just too much”.

The Foreign Service lifestyle has pros and cons; Friendships Missed the Most.

The spouses agreed that Foreign Service life had its challenges and opportunities, but it was the loss of, or separation from, friendships made in the host country that in the end made it most difficult to move.

“I am happy to be back in the U.S. for the shopping, the convenience, the ease of communicating in English! But I will always miss my homes, friends and relationships I developed overseas”.

“I was happy to be free of Embassy confines and rules, but missed my friends at post a great deal”.

“I enjoyed the Foreign Service and benefited from living overseas”.

“As a State Department spouse, one gets used to moving, to making again new friends, and to once again finding where one “fits” in a social set-up. It is the people you meet along the way and the friendships you make and keep, that make it all worthwhile.

The final reentry to retirement is also very difficult. A number of spouses pointed out that the last reentry for the purposes of retirement, was also bittersweet, as it was mixed with a sense of loss of career, lifestyle, and a sense of fitting in:

“We knew that the last reentry would precede retirement. So all of the retirement issues were facing us, and the sense of loss on leaving our last post was perhaps more, knowing it was our last post”.

“My last reentry was a “retirement reentry” that presented its own challenges – separation from a global lifestyle and pursuit of a new course in life. After 38 years of moving, starting from scratch, building a “spouse” role and coping with home leaves and reentries, I learned that I am the one who must adapt. But as comfortable as I am, I continue to be “standing on the outside looking in”.

However, one respondent had a solution for this sense of felt loss: “I came back, didn’t like it, and went back overseas again after retirement”.

What the State Department Could Do to Help Spouses with Reentry

Many of the respondents, as the mean age of the sample was 62.5, were married to retired Foreign Service Officers, and therefore elected not to speculate on what might be helpful to spouses and families in reentry. Those who did, however, can be summarized in two points: more information about reentry is needed and how to access it, and counseling should be available for spouses and families in distress.

More information about reentry is needed and spouses need to know how to access it. There was general agreement that information about what to expect in reentry was not readily available to employees and spouses, as in the following statements:

“They (the State Department) need to be sure people know that reentry can be difficult. Many assume that because they are coming home, it will feel like home”.

(From a former OBC trainer and FLO staff person) “Though included in overseas training, employees and family members departing to go overseas are not able to hear the reentry message. Help to publish periodic articles in publications to raise general awareness of the issues”.

“Help people get the information they need according to where they will be living: school information, car registration and insurance, medical needs are what all returnees need”.

A major point made was that reentry information was not lacking as much as information about how to access it, as in the following statements:

“The most helpful information is knowing how to get the information they need”.

“They need a better and more effective way of getting to people. Not everybody knows about the resources State has”.

“The responsibility for reentry information should be the CLO’s job. I think they have the responsibility, but they don’t do it”.

“The State Department does a lot through FLO, but they just need to get the word out more. I worked at FLO and knew what they offered, but many did not use/know about their services”.

Counseling or additional support should be made available for spouses and families in distress. Some respondents felt that counseling services should be extended beyond just employees, to permit sessions with spouses and families who need more help in coping with reentry. The following statements were a sample of these comments:

“Counseling for spouses in reentry should be available for those who need it. Focus help on those in their first reentry”.

“Provide more personal support for people in stressful reentries”.

“A debriefing session for the employee and spouse would be helpful, to provide some reentry information and referral assistance if needed”.

“Counseling should be available for teenagers with someone who understands the reentry problems they have”.

“I was going through a very difficult time this last reentry as my husband was sent to Iraq directly from our last posting. I managed to get a one-time visit with a State department psychiatrist that made all the difference in my ability to carry on. I think those who are struggling should have this benefit”.

A discussion of these findings as they relate to previous research, the social work person-in-environment perspective, and as they may apply to Foreign Service and other

spouse sojourners returning home, for the explicit understanding of social work practitioners and others working with these populations, concludes this study.

DISCUSSION OF STUDY FINDINGS

The person-in-environment (PIE) lens is used in this study as it provides an overarching perspective for social work professionals to understand the reentry client's presenting problems, focusing primarily on the social environment of the sojourner client with the demands of a mobile lifestyle. The ecological model of this perspective is particularly useful in the study of reentry, as sojourners and the institutions they represent are in a situation of mutual influence, in which both benefit most when their needs are reciprocally met. Families are the employee's primary support system, and accompanying spouses and family members who are functioning well in the overseas and home environments benefit the family, the spouse, the employee and the employing institution. The family systems model, based on the effect of members of the family system upon one another, is useful in conjunction with the person-in-environment perspective to help in the understanding of this interconnection, and is of particular use in the study and treatment of sojourners who live within a family context. It is used in this study as accompanying spouses, male or female, generally fulfill more of the caretaking and support role in the family; when there is distress in the support system neither the family nor the employee functions well.

This study has identified a number of factors which, when viewed through the person-in-environment or family systems lenses, form clusters that are useful to social

work practitioners in understanding the reentry adjustment among Foreign Service spouses and other accompanying spouse populations. Three clusters have been identified here: the family systems, person-in-environment overseas and person-in-environment reentry clusters.

The Family Systems Cluster

The family systems cluster helps to understand how certain demographic and intra-familial factors are associated with the reentry adjustment of the spouse. First, this study found that the age of the spouse was a factor in her/his reentry adjustment, the younger the spouse, the greater the likelihood of distress after reentry. Second, the length of time the spouse has been married was shown to affect her/his reentry distress, with those married for shorter periods of time more likely to suffer reentry distress than those who have been married longer. Third, the number of children and their ages has been shown to affect the spouse's reentry adjustment, with fewer and younger children more likely to cause greater distress. Fourth, this study found the inter-familial effect from the qualitative data, which points to the additional stress caused by the employee's own job and reentry adjustment, as well as the child-parent effect of the children who are going through their reentry adjustment. Individually, these factors have been shown in this study to cause reentry distress among spouses, but when they occur together, they may cause even greater distress.

This study has supported previous reentry studies which have shown an association between age and reentry adjustment in adults (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963) and in children (Steinglass and Edwards, 1993; Huff, 2001; Yoshida et al, 2002; Moore, 1987), namely that the younger the age, the greater the reentry adjustment

difficulty. However, this study has added new information by showing the intra-familial effect of the ages of the spouse and the children. In other words, no previous studies were found that addressed the effect of the ages of the children on either the spouse or the employee's reentry adjustment.

This study has also added new information to previous studies which have shown that being married is a factor which reduces reverse culture shock (Moore, 1987; Huffman, 1989). This study has found that not only does being married appear to be a protective factor for reentry distress, but also the longer the spouse is married, the lower the level of reentry distress.

The implications of these findings are that younger spouses with less or perhaps no previous reentry experience tend to have reverse culture shock, and the more factors in the cluster that present, the greater may be the culture shock and the more readily it may be observed by the social work practitioner. These findings are helpful to social work practitioners or others working with returnees from overseas assignments, as they are based upon readily obtained demographic information useful in the assessment of a client's situation and may guide treatment to include the dynamics of the family system.

Person-in-environment Cluster: Spouses Overseas

This study found a second cluster of factors associated with the reentry adjustment of spouses, based on how the spouses interacted with their environment while overseas.

The first factor is the finding that spouses who are more frequent participants in activities while they are overseas have less difficulty with reentry adjustment than those who participate less often. The implication of this finding is that those who are more

active and more sociable outside the home while overseas are less likely to have a difficult reentry than those who are more isolated and do not participate in activities while overseas.

The second factor is the finding that, when the analysis discriminated between specific kinds of social activities a Foreign Service spouse engages in overseas, spouses who participate more in embassy community and U.S. Department of State activities (i.e., hosting and attending more representational events, making more friends and interacting more with the embassy community) have less reverse culture shock than those who participate more in non-embassy/U.S. Department of State activities. The implication of this finding is not only that participating in activities overseas is helpful in reducing reverse culture shock, but that the key factor is involvement in embassy/U.S. Department of State community events, activities and friendships, not to the exclusion of the other non-embassy activities, but as an important part of a spouse's social interactions overseas. This finding supports the previous research of Rohrlich and Martin (1991) who found that American college students studying abroad who were more interactive with host country nationals (i.e., went on outings, discussed important issues) were more satisfied with their life overseas, but less likely to be satisfied with their life upon return home than those students who were less interactive with host country nationals. In this study, also, it was found that satisfaction with one's life overseas is not associated with reverse culture shock; that is, those who are fulfilled overseas may actually have more reentry adjustment difficulties upon return.

The third in this cluster of person-in-environment factors overseas is cultural identity change. This study found, in using the 3-item Cultural Identity Change Scale of

the Cultural Identity Model (Sussman, 2001), that those individuals who reported “Yes” they had felt less American upon return to the U.S., and “Yes” they had felt more a part of a host culture where they had lived than the U.S. experienced significantly more reverse culture shock than those who answered “No” to these questions. The implication of this finding is that spouses whose cultural identity changes from “more American” to “more a part of a host culture” experience more reverse culture shock upon their return home, as an important part of their identity changed, at least temporarily, after their overseas assignment.

Sussman’s (2001) additional finding on the Cultural Identity Change Scale, which addressed the respondents’ sense of being “a more global or international person after my spouse’s assignment”, was only partially supported in this study. The overwhelming majority (94.9%) of spouses’ responses indicated that they felt they were more global or international people after their last reentry, but no relationship was found between feeling more global or international and their reentry adjustment. Sussman (2001) had found, as had Leembruggen-Kallberg (1997) that those who had developed a more global perspective had found greater satisfaction with their lives. The question of more or less satisfaction with their lives after return was not asked in this study, so the previous results can only be partially supported. It is known from this study that satisfaction with their lives overseas was not associated with lower reentry distress upon return.

Together these three findings form a cluster of “person-in-environment” reentry factors that help to understand how the overseas social environment is associated with the Foreign Service spouses’ reentry adjustment. The implications of these findings are that social activity while overseas is associated with less reentry adjustment difficulty upon

return home, but spouses need to also maintain some grounding in their own American culture through participation in embassy/company community activities. Those who participate less in their own community activities and more in host country activities may experience greater culture shock upon return home, and an important reason for this is they have undergone, to some extent, a cultural identity change.

Person-in-Environment Cluster: Spouses in Reentry

This study found a third cluster of factors associated with the reentry adjustment of Foreign Service spouses, based on their experiences with return to the U.S. The cluster is made up of the respondents' answers to a question on expectations/experience, comments on their own reentry experiences, and responses to the HCSS (Fray, 1988).

At the core of the cluster is the spouses' response to the question, "Was your reentry experience after your last return more difficult than anticipated?" Those spouses who answered "Yes" had a much higher culture shock score than those who answered "No" (see Appendix B, question #48). This means a primary characteristic of the reentry phenomenon as first identified by Adler (1981), showing that the experience of reentry is more difficult than the sojourner expects it to be, was supported in this population of Foreign Service spouses.

A second factor in the reentry cluster is the finding that the spouses' first reentry, or at least reentries early in the career, were more difficult than their later reentries, which came after the experience of several returns. Statements like the following from a veteran Foreign Service spouse explain this point well, "The first time we came back was the hardest. There was so much we had to do that we didn't expect and we didn't know

how to get it done. This was my seventh reentry and it wasn't so bad – you know what you have to do and just go get it done.”

A third factor in the reentry cluster of person-in-environment findings is the wide range of variation in interpretation of expectations versus experience. For one respondent, the experience was more difficult than her expectations of it, as she felt her State Department mobile lifestyle was not understood or appreciated by others, stating, “I remember feeling lonely, bored, and depressed at times. No one understood our lifestyle or cared about it. That included extended family”. For others it was about the basics of reduced income and increased needs (such as furniture), as stated by a spouse, “... (going) from comfortable overseas living to reduced income and masses of expensive merchandise offered and needed”. These responses show that after reentry, the reality of some expectations, such as being closer to family again and having American conveniences and shopping, were not found to be as they had been anticipated, and the types of expectations varied widely between individuals.

The HCSS (Fray, 1991) showed other areas of experience unexpected by the sample in the areas of grief and loss and cultural dissonance. Two items on the HCSS were considered true by over 50% of the sample regarding issues of grief and loss, “Homesickness/nostalgia for my country of overseas residence was a common feeling for me” and “Feelings of loss hit me when I thought of my overseas residence”. Regarding cultural dissonance, four items on the HCSS were considered true of the spouses' experience by over 50% of the sample. These items were: “I experienced difficulty with the overall pace of life”, “I found that people related to me on a more superficial level

than I was used to”, “I was critical of the American lifestyle”, and “Americans’ wealth and spending habits upset me”.

Anticipated Findings Not Found

The most anticipated finding that was not shown in the results of this study was any significant difference in reverse culture shock for Foreign Born spouses as compared with spouses who were US born and raised. Due to their experience of being born and raised in another culture, it was expected that a significant difference would have been found (Bender, 2002); however, in this sample, which contained a sufficient number of Foreign Born Spouses to determine any such difference (26 out of 158 respondents), none was found. In addition, there was no significant difference found in the reverse culture shock of spouses who had been born and raised in both the US and overseas. Although no significant difference was found, there was a difference in the mean rank when the variables of Born and Raised in the US versus Overseas were analyzed for their association with the dependent variable, culture shock. A higher mean rank (greater culture shock) was found for spouses Born and Raised Overseas (81.68 vs. 68.07). This result does show that there is more culture shock experienced by Foreign Born spouses, but that the culture shock is not great enough to consider it a statistically significant difference.

A second anticipated result that was not found was a difference in culture shock between male (Kerr, 2002) and female spouses. However, when the mean culture shock value for the small number of male respondents (4) was calculated, although it was slightly higher than for female spouses, (38.75 for the men compared to 35.67 for the

group as a whole), this difference was not statistically significant. It may be indicative of some distinction between the two groups, but due to the small number of male spouses who responded to the survey, it is not possible to determine if the differences reached statistical significance.

A third finding that was anticipated but not found was any difference in culture shock by racial/ethnic group origin. Again, this is due to the small number of participants from non-Caucasian groups (6 Hispanics, 3 African Americans, 5 Asian/Pacific Islanders and 1 who identified herself as ½ Hispanic and ½ Caucasian). The mean culture shock for the group of 15 non-Caucasians was 34.86, slightly below the 35.67 for the spouses as a whole. These spouses were born and raised in the U.S., were highly educated and showed that their experience was not very different, if at all, from that of Caucasian Foreign Service spouses.

Implications of the Findings for Those Working with Returnees

Based on the findings, there are clear implications for social work practice and others working with returnees:

- 1) Younger spouses and first-time returnees are more likely to experience reentry adjustment difficulties, and are going to be in greater need of supportive services from practitioners who understand the problems of those who are facing reentry for the first time. An important aspect of counseling may be the non-fulfillment of expectations the spouse had regarding what life in the U.S. would be like versus their experiences in reentry.
- 2) Spouses with younger children and fewer years of marriage are more likely to experience reentry adjustment difficulties, even if they have previously adjusted to

reentry during previous returns when they did not have children. Spouses with younger children may be in need of supportive, strengths-building counseling and perhaps child development and couples counseling services, from practitioners who understand the problems of reentry and how it affects the spouse personally and as caregiver for the family system that is also undergoing reentry distress.

3) Spouses who are socially active in a variety of activities while living overseas, which include involvement in embassy (or American) activities, events and friendships appear to receive a preventive benefit in terms of reentry adjustment. Spouses who do not participate in American community/embassy events, but participate strictly in host country activities, may not receive this benefit and may in fact experience greater culture reverse culture shock upon their return home.

4) Spouses facing retirement or in retirement also have special needs and may be in need of special counseling services after reentry from their last overseas assignment, involving role loss and development of a new life for themselves and the retired employee.

5) Spouses who return on assignment to a new location in the U.S. where they have not lived before have a more difficult time adjusting on return than spouses who go to a city where they have lived before, and supportive assistance should be anticipated as necessary for this group.

6) Spouses who returned to familiar surroundings reported that subsequent reentries were easier, including return to the same city, neighborhood, home, schools and churches.

Suggestions for the Sponsoring Institutions

The sample was asked in a qualitative question to offer suggestions regarding what would be helpful for the sponsoring organization to do (in this case the U.S.

Department of State) to help with the reentry of spouses and families. The responses the spouses gave are as follows:

- 1) More information about reentry is needed and spouses need to know how to access it. Respondents frequently stated they did not know how to get or find reentry information. Many stated they needed practical information prior to their departure from overseas regarding vehicle registration, finding good schools, how to register their children for school, and insurance issues, according to the city of return assignment, and did not know how or where to access it. One former FLO staff person suggested periodic articles in department publications to raise general awareness of the reentry issues, stating that training is included during the preparatory courses to go overseas, but the reentry message is not heard at that time. The participants were very appreciative of the work the FLO and CLO offices have done on the behalf of families, but also felt that the CLO overseas needs to provide more reentry information to those returning to the U.S., and some suggested a Washington, DC contact person for returnees in the FLO office.
- 2) Counseling or additional support should be made available for spouses and families in distress. Some respondents felt counseling services should be extended beyond employees (such as the Employee Consultation Service, or ECS), to permit sessions with spouses and families for evaluation and referral for those who need ongoing assistance coping with reentry distress. Other suggestions were de-briefing sessions with the reentering employee and spouse, special counseling or group sessions for teenagers coping with return issues, and counseling for spouses and families who are coping with separation when the employee is sent to dangerous locations, as Afghanistan and Iraq.

3) Continuation of the successful employment assistance program, or development of a spouse employment program in organizations and corporations that do not already have one. The U.S. Department of State's FLO (Family Liaison Office) employment assistance program was praised by respondents. This finding, in combination with another finding that job satisfaction for the spouses was very positively associated with reentry adjustment success, indicates that this program is not only appreciated, but working and helping spouses. The suggestions for improvement in this program included assistance in finding part-time positions and more help finding positions appropriate to their level of skills.

Applicability of Study Findings and Future Research

The applicability of this study's findings to spouses and families from other sponsoring agencies, institutions or corporations is thought by this researcher to be quite high. This is because many of the same issues for spouses present themselves despite the exact nature of the employee's work, as they are accompanying spouses who are tasked with making the adjustment to another culture, from culture to culture, and home again while operating within the rules and regulations of the employer and the demands of being the primary caregiver in the family.

Future research in the area of spouse reentry adjustment is encouraged. A new scale designed for measuring reentry adjustment for accompanying spouses would be very useful. Further, the HCSS (Fray, 1988) is 20 years old and needs to be updated for the concerns of younger returnees, male spouses and spouses of color.

An additional suggested area for future research is in the meaning of friendships for internationally mobile spouses. This study found that friendships made overseas

appeared to be a major loss felt by returning spouses, who found themselves gravitating to people after return who had also been overseas. This information caused this researcher to wonder, “What is it that is so special in these relationships made overseas?”, “Why are these friendships difficult to duplicate after return to the U.S.?”, and “Do friendships made during sojourns overseas take on greater significance where there is less emphasis than in the U.S. on material wealth?”

Study Limitations

The HCSS reentry adjustment scores found in this research showed that Foreign Service spouses experienced a relatively low level of reentry distress (35.67 on a scale of 20 to 100), but one qualification needs to be made to these findings. This study utilized the membership list of an organization of Foreign Service spouses, the AAFSW (Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide), as its sampling frame. The sample was composed of AAFSW members who responded to a recruitment questionnaire. Those respondents were primarily over the age of 50 (mean age 62.5), and therefore the sample is representative of an age grouping whose experience was skewed in the direction of more experience with the reentry process. The low level of reentry distress among spouses in the Foreign Service population as a whole could be deceptively low as a larger number of returning employees and spouses are relatively new recruits. Whenever possible, an effort should be made to include higher numbers of recently returned sojourners in future reentry studies for the clearest possible results. The analysis of the data used in this study took this into consideration, using methods of analysis that still made it possible to determine what groups of spouses were more

affected by reentry than others, but whenever possible the sample should clearly represent the population studied.

Conclusions

The value of this study is, foremost, that it adds information and greater understanding of the reentry phenomenon to a limited literature on the topic currently available in the Social Work profession. In turn, it has brought a social work perspective into the discourse of reentry research.

This study has added a social work conceptual framework, the person-in-environment perspective, along with the family systems model, to assist social work practitioners and others working with repatriates to understand the inter-relatedness of the organization, the employee, and the family, especially in regards to those who lead an internationally mobile lifestyle. Additionally, this study looks at a wider gamut of factors than most previous reentry studies, allowing practitioners to rule in or rule out individual or clusters of factors that may be useful in understanding and treating their internationally mobile clients.

The beneficiaries of this additional knowledge are the spouses and families who accompany employees overseas and back home, not just the spouses of Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), for much of the information gained in this study identifies factors that go beyond the particular sponsoring organization. It addresses instead internationally mobile spouses who are more likely to suffer reentry distress. When this information is accessed by practitioners and others, it can assist spouses and families in understanding their situation better, the causes of their distress can be normalized, and an agenda can be developed to help alleviate the distress.

However, in order to be beneficial to spouses and families, practitioners and sponsoring organizations first need to make the information regarding the problems of reentry adjustment and factors which indicate a greater susceptibility to reentry distress more widely available. A primary recommendation from the spouses studied was the need for reentry information to be more widely distributed. Their second recommendation was for counseling resources to be more widely available to those returning home. Third, as spouses in this study have shown, programs targeted at providing the tools for reentrants in constructing a new life at home, such as employment assistance, contribute to fewer reentry adjustment difficulties.

The focus of institutional structures is, understandably, on the primary task at hand, which for international businesses and other organizations means getting people on the ground overseas, and programs have been put in place to assist in this process for the employee and, sometimes, the accompanying spouse. Now more emphasis needs to be placed on the reentry process, not just for the reentering employee, but for the spouse and family as well, for the well-being of the entity is interconnected with the viability and well-being of the family structure.

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