Cultural Mentors: Exploring the Role of Relationships in the Adaptation and Transformation of Women Educators Who Go Overseas to Work

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Cultural Mentors: Exploring the Role of Relationships in the Adaptation and Transformation of Women Educators Who Go Overseas to Work

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Abstract: The overseas experiences of thirteen women educators in adult and higher education were characterized by four chronological stages: departure, first three months, after three months, and re-entry. Four stages of relationships emerged to coincide with the chronological contexts. The line between personal and professional relationships was often blurred.

This research project emanated from autobiographical learning. I am a woman who has taught at the university level in Asia and the Middle East. This experience led me to probe the experiences of thirteen women educators in adult and higher education from the United States who went to Ghana, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Morocco, the Peoples Republic of China, St. Lucia, Senegal, the Slovak Republic, and South Africa to work for an extended period of time. The purpose of this qualitative research project was to explore the role of relationships in the adaptation and transformation of women educators in adult and higher education who go overseas to work. There is a need for such a study because more and more women educators will be going overseas, often to developing countries, in the 21st century (Elfenbein, Lucas, Ewell, Cirkensa, and McFadden, l998). My research findings are a valuable resource to inform them what the overseas experience is like. There was personal incentive for such a study because women colleagues in America frequently ask me how they can arrange to work overseas. The stories of the participants suggest innovative and differing ways to accomplish this goal. Most notably, the study addresses a void in three literature bases. It informs transformative learning theory about the role of relationships, specifically those sought out by the women in this study to navigate the changes that they had in the overseas experience. Second, it fills a gap in the literature of working abroad with tales about the professional and personal aspects of the participants' experiences. Finally, it contributes previously unavailable knowledge about how women adapt and learn to the literature of cross-cultural learning and working abroad.

Framework of Study

This study is in the interpretive paradigm because it is about how people make meaning of experience (Merriam, l998). It is heuristic because my experiences are included in the data (Moustakas, l990). My research is grounded in Mezirow's (l978b; 1991) transformative learning theory. His original work was conducted with women who went to college after a long absence from education (Mezirow, l978a). Since the seminal work of Mezirow, few research projects have been conducted in the field of transformative learning theory using women only. In addition, my work contributes to the extant body of empirical studies that were designed to test and expand transformative learning theory in relationship to cross-cultural learning (Harper,

l994; Holt, l994; Kennedy, l994; Lee, l997; Taylor, l993; Temple, l999; Whalley, l995). I also reviewed the literature in cross-cultural adaptation (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, l963; Storti, l989) and culture shock (Adler, l975). In the literature about working abroad, there are few works about women professionals overseas. Bystydzienski and Resnik (l995), in their compilation of the narratives of fourteen women with cross-cultural experiences note, "A focus on gender is particularly important because relatively little is known about how women make cross-cultural transitions" (p. 3). They go on to note that stepping out of one's own society opens up the mind to new ways of thinking and looking at the world and is likely to lead to a re-evaluation of one's culture of origin. This transition requires women to conduct this kind of self-examination while living in another culture.

Methodology

Data were collected through preliminary questionnaires, interviews, follow-up interviews, and examination of personal documents. Participants included two African-American women and eleven White women who currently live throughout the United States. At the time of the overseas experiences they ranged in age from twenty-one to seventy-five. The criteria for participant selection were that they were American women who: (1) held college degrees or professional training, (2) stayed six months in the host country, (3) sought out supporting relationships, (4) participated in an academic experience in adult or higher education, (5) knew a language used for instructional purposes, and (6) returned home after the experience. A ten-step data analysis process was used: (1) analyzing initial contact information of each participant; (2) examining data from the preliminary questionnaires; (3) ongoing analysis while I transcribed the interviews; (4) analysis of written text, tapes, and documents; (5) data triangulation (Mathison, l988); (6) broad themes were used to develop a coding system; (7) *Ethnograph* (Seidel, l998), a data analysis software program, was used to organize and code the transcriptions; (8) analysis of the thick descriptions under each exemplar code; (9) preliminary findings were written after analyzing each code; and (10) a data display of broad themes was developed. In addition, at the end of the study an asynchronous WEB based discussion group was formed to promote dialogue among the participants.

Background Context

Due to the complexity of the study, it is important to highlight the background context of my research findings. First, I discovered the participants perceived that their status as American professionals overrode their female status in the host country. Second, the participants were dependent on interpersonal relationships for support before going overseas, during the overseas experience, and after coming home. In addition, trigger events or unexpected events often emanated from interpersonal relationships. Third, all participants had positive international experiences before and/or after the time overseas reported for the interview. Fourth, I discovered that there were four stages of trigger events, but the types of events could not be described using the terms trigger event or culture shock. I had to coin a more descriptive term, *culture trigger*, to identify what happened to the participants when they experienced unexpected events in overseas settings. I was originally only looking at the data for the period of time that each participant spent overseas. When I re-examined my data, it was evident to me that the departure and re-entry stages were critical because they too involved trigger events that changed the participants' views

of reality. I coined the terms departure trigger and re-entry trigger to describe trigger events at those stages. These descriptive terms are applied throughout this paper.

Findings

The **first** overall finding is that the overseas experience does not only include the actual time and culture triggers in the host country, but the departure and re-entry stages as well. **Second**, there were four stages of trigger events according to the chronological context of the experience: departure stage, first three months of the overseas experience, after first three months of the experience, and re-entry. **Third,** there were four corresponding stages of relationships. Negotiating personal and professional relationships is a part of the transformative process. **Fourth**, the participants showed tremendous self-determination in carrying out the experience, particularly during the departure and re-entry stages. If relationships were not in place to process what was happening, the participants forged ahead with self-determination. **Fifth**, all participants noted being changed in some way. Most frequently, they incorporated aspects of the host culture and their experiences into their self-identities. **Sixth**, transformation is ongoing and does not stop when individuals come home. The discussion of the four stages of trigger events and supporting relationships follows.

Stage One: Departure Triggers, "I was wandering around like a lost goose."
There were two forms of dominant supporting relationships in the departure stage. First, relationships with immediate and extended family members took center stage during the months before leaving. Most departure triggers were rooted in negotiating personal relationships with immediate and extended family. Ten participants had family members who questioned their decisions to go overseas. Most reactions involved ill-informed anticipation of what the experience might be like for the participant. Sometimes the participants even had difficulty in telling their families that they were going overseas because they anticipated the reaction. Christine, who went to the Slovak Republic, waited to tell her family that she and her husband had applied for the Peace Corps, "The family [was] the last [group of people] we told." Lucy, who went to Morocco, had to deal with a similar reaction from her father:

> I will tell you a little story. My father (…) is probably the most open-minded person, and growing up with him probably had a huge effect on how I view people and view the world because he is just so embracing of all people. His first comment to me was [when] he was shocked, "You can't go there by yourself." I said, "Why Dad?" He said, well for one thing you're a woman." I said, "Dad, well I could be a woman and travel overseas." He said, "Ya, but you're not married." I said, "Dad, well, single women travel abroad." Then he said, "You're Black." I said, "Dad, I am going to Africa, for God's sake." He said, "I knew that one wouldn't work, but I thought I would try it out anyway."

In addition, consideration of relationships with spouses and children were important to the participants during the departure stage. Five participants went with spouses, and school age children accompanied three participants. The second dominant relationship in stage one was with work colleagues who also had to be convinced about the wisdom of undertaking such a journey, but in the end came around to support the overseas adventure.

Stage Two: Culture Triggers During the First Three Months, "I had to build an identity, I had to build credibility, and I had to build rapport."

The first few months of time in the host culture were spent searching for places to fit in and belong. Foremost, the participants depended heavily on family members or persons who lived in the same residence, such as an apartment mates or host family members, for support. These were relationships already in place so no matter what happened during the day, individuals could go back home and know that there was a support system in place. Second, the host country work supervisor was a dominant cultural mentor at this stage. This relationship was a convenient, built-in connection because not only was the supervisor used to negotiate workplace issues, but also personal issues primarily dealing with getting settled in the community and with unfamiliar academic procedures. The first few months of the experience were spent searching to fit into the new culture while still maintaining relationships from the home culture. Christine expressed ambiguity of where she fit in when she arrived in the host culture:

> I had to build an identity, I had to build credibility, and I had to build rapport…. I felt a lot like a child. You know, I could do remarkably well in a foreign language for somebody who had studied it for three months, but to them I sounded like a child. So, I think that they took that to be (…) the kind of intelligence I had.

In addition to feeling uncertain about how they fit in, the participants entered the first three months of the experience with a whirlwind of new faces and activities. Dealing with unfamiliar academic systems was very frustrating at stage two. For example, when Miriam started to conduct research in the Peoples Republic of China, she quickly discovered the library was set up in the order of who bought the books and not according to subject categories:

> Like for example, there was only one floor of the library available to juniors and another one for the sophomores. The books were put together not in any order of what we would recognize, but in terms of who purchased them, and that was the cataloging system. It was a difficult system in terms of trying to find anything.

The personal needs that sparked a change in the meaning schemes for the participants were not unlike those women would have in a domestic relocation: driving, housing, security, getting oriented; however, they were magnified by baffling systems and the uncertain infrastructure of the host country. Often they were as much positive, in the sense that there was a feeling of challenge, as negative in nature.

Stage Three: Culture Triggers After the First Three Months, "We functioned as though we were permanent there. So, it meant in a larger sense that we were very open [about meeting people] and that we got to know people very well."

The main system of cultural mentors and supporting relationships was found among host country colleagues, students, and friends. Sometime after the first three months of an overseas experience the newness started to wear off, and it was necessary to have supporting relationships in the host country. Glorious stories about the people whom the participants met and interacted with emerged from this part of the interviews. The number of relationships with persons from the host culture blossomed. Relationships were not necessarily centered on negative cultural triggers. There were joyous times to chat with people and learn about the culture. Due to these strong

relationships, it was often hard for the participants to eventually leave the host country. Even though some women had accompanying spouses or lived with an American colleague, they were able to branch out on their own into the host culture and meet people who became mentors and friends. Professional relationships were often exciting. After all, these participants are women educators with excellent qualifications, and they wanted to feel that they could succeed in an environment outside of the one in their home country. Relationships with host country students were particularly invigorating for them. Amy, a Fulbrighter in South Africa, notes an impressionable time in the classroom:

> Once I was lecturing on either reconstruction literature or the Harlem Renaissance to a group of grad students majoring in English…. I gave an example, and I was talking, lecturing as I do and looking up. What happened was that they were clapping to the beat that was inherent in the poetry. I thought it was just the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen.

When the participants found their skills were transferable to stimulating the students in the host country and to working effectively with colleagues, it was a reward for all the effort that they put into the preparation and adjustment.

Stage Four: Re-entry, "I look like they do, I talk like they do, and I feel different inside."
Re-entry was a time of re-establishing and finding new relationships. At stage four, the participants were ending their sojourns and returning to the United States. They had found new identities and navigated a myriad of relationships with host nationals. Now they were searching again for new relationships. Relationships with family, colleagues, and friends were important during all parts of the re-entry stage from the host country. This was a disorienting time when sadness was most frequently expressed. Furthermore, it appears all but two participants needed a buffer zone or grace period before being plunged totally back into life in the United States. This time was important to enable the sojourner to process and reconfigure her self-identity as a result of the overseas experience. Several women spent this time traveling in a country other than the host country. Many used this buffer zone to spend time with immediate family members. Aurora who went to South Africa noted, "How could you be gone that long and be back in your home country in twenty hours?" Miriam explains, "I just thought that I could step right back into my life, and you really can't do that. Space that you held before is now gone, it is like starting all over again. You have to remake your whole way again." Similar thoughts were expressed in another manner by Lucy who found that one of her re-entry triggers involved trying to sustain a relationship, "I couldn't sustain a relationship, [and] this is sounding weird. I had difficulty with sustaining relationships with individuals who were just narrow in their thinking." Re-entry was an unsettling time.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

Relationships played a key role in the adaptation and transformation of the women educators in this study who went overseas to work. In every stage of the overseas experience there were trigger events that emanated from relationships. The kinds of cultural mentors and supporting relationships changed according to four stages of the chronological contexts of the experience. Personal and professional relationships often blurred together. This study has implications for all

three areas of the original literature basis of the project. First, for adult education it suggests that stages and roles of relationships in an experience need to be looked at more carefully in not only the overseas experience, but also the classroom. Specifically, for the field of transformative learning, it implies that the trigger or unexpected events could be defined according to the chronological context of when it happens in an experience and also that transformation is ongoing. Second, the findings are also important for understanding of cross-cultural adaptation because they show that more attention should to be given to understanding the departure stage of the overseas sojourn. In addition, my work suggests that there is a need for a "buffer zone", a period between leaving the host country and re-integrating into the home culture. Re-entry is a time of disorientation and re-adjustment where a person needs to not only re-establish relationships, but also seek out new ones. The study informs educational institutions to be sensitive to how the overseas experience influences women educators and to determine how they can support them when they return. It is the start of a new strand of discussion in the literature of working abroad. In sum, my research not only contributes knowledge to the theory of adult education, but also about the pragmatic, overseas experiences of women adult educators.

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