

Eclipses in the Sun:

A phenomenological study of the lived experience of
returning home after an extended period abroad

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May, 2017



Abstract:

In order to investigate the lived experience of an individual on returning to the home culture after an extended stay abroad, a young woman, Maria, was interviewed. Her story was examined using interpretive phenomenological analysis. What had started as an investigation of day-to-day experience became an insight in to the psychological motivation for this woman's decision to leave, how she coped abroad and how she is currently dealing with her return. It is apparent that literature on 'returning' is inadequate in describing the lived experience of an individual such as Maria.

Introduction and Literature Review

The reasons people choose to leave their family, friends and familiar homeland for places new and distant are legion. What, though, is the impact of a change of place, circumstance and culture on the individual's sense of Self? Further, having been abroad, and been impacted by a new culture, how does the changed person find the adaption to 'pastures old'?

The contribution of culture as a factor in defining the Self is widely accepted by psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists. The way this sense of Self is impacted by a change in culture has been an interest of mine since moving abroad to live and seeing how people attempted to cope with living in a different culture, and the coping mechanisms they employed, from socialising exclusively with fellow expatriates, to self-medication with alcohol or drugs such as Prozac, to even 'going native' to a degree that locals looked askance at. These coping strategies, however, might just as necessarily be employed when the culture shift is reversed; that is, when a person returns to his or her home own country after having lived abroad for many years and adapted to life there. In my case, my return to the UK, and to my home town of Manchester, was often uncomfortable and disorientating: I looked like an Englishman, I walked and talked like an Englishman, but for the most part I did not know what was going on — I patently was not what I appeared to be. In the field in which I work, teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) this returning is not an uncommon phenomenon so it was my wish to study how other people had gone about this process of coming home, of re-acculturation. The aim of this research, therefore, is to determine how returning to one's home country after an extended period living in a foreign culture can impact a sense of Self.

Before considering the existing literature on this topic, it is important that certain parts of the research topic be defined. There is a fair amount of literature about 'sojourners', those people who have lived abroad for work or study, many for some several years. These sojourners, however, do not always fit the requirements of this research as either they have not been abroad long enough, or whilst abroad they either have maintained close links and regular visits to their parent culture, religion, or families. The sojourners most certainly share some of the issues with those I aim to investigate, but there are marked differences, too, in terms of age, reason for going abroad etc. It was also my intention to interview somebody with a strong sense of self, a more mature person who had already been through the stages of personal and social maturation. For this, I aimed to recruit an interviewee of at least middle years, and preferably a parent for having children necessitates a deeper involvement in a culture, unless the participant is cushioned from having to deal with the vicissitudes of daily life by their money.

This research emphasises the impact of the experience on the Self. It is necessary, therefore, to define what this term, Self, means. In psychology, Self is considered to have three components: self-image, self-esteem and ideal self. The first is how we will describe ourselves in terms of personality and social role. This social role is inevitably bound up with cultural elements as society cannot exist without a cultural context. There are different theories that account for the development of the Self, but all include this social element. Indeed, some cultures in which the self-concept is itself a cultural phenomenon, integrating the individual with the wider group. (Gross, 2017, p. 560). In Transactional Analysis, the Self is described as 'the person as he or she experiences himself or herself, as having a distinctive identity, able to initiate actions and is being perceived by react to by others.... The concept of Self is subjective (phenomenological)' (Tilney, 1988, p.112). Further, Masterson describes the 'how ones real self begins to develop in early childhood,... one

identifies it and articulates it through testing and experiment in the environment to bring ones real self into harmony with the outer world through... relationships.'(Masterson, 1998, p. vii)

In this research, it is important that the subject is mature and already has a well-developed sense of Self. This is in no small part in order to reduce, as far as is reasonably possible, 'confounding factors' such as the life events that contribute to our sense of identity and relationship to the world: coming-of-age, romance, becoming independent and others.

Literature review

The common term for those affected by relocation from one place to another is culture shock. According to Stuart and Leggett (1998), 'wherever people go and for whatever reason, they take their culture with them... Culture provides a framework for interpersonal and social interactions'. It is understandable, therefore, that 'contact with an unfamiliar culture can lead to anxiety, stress, mental illness and... Physical illness and suicide.' (ibid). The authors cite the anthropologist Oberg (Oberg, 1960, cited in Stuart and Leggett, 1998) as the origin of this term culture shock. They list the key aspects of this condition: stress; sense of loss and depression; rejection by the new culture; a confused sense of role; anxiety and sometimes even discussed; and feelings of impotence. They explain how the degree of culture shock could be exacerbated or ameliorated by a number of factors, the most prominent of which is the individual's degree of sense of control.

The paper by Yoshida et al. (2001) addresses some of the shortcomings of the above paper. This is a longitudinal study of Japanese returning students after some years of

studying at school abroad. Some of the problems the students encounter were certainly unique to Japan; for example, on returning home, they were regarded as different from their peers in the strongly group ethos in Japanese school. The study was quantitative and statistical analysis indicated several relevant points: children who had spent longer abroad find it harder to readjust, except if they were bilingual or had gone abroad at an earlier age. The authors attributed these findings to a decreased tendency to self reflect (Yoshida et al., 2001, p.442). I interpret this as these individuals having a more robust sense of self and less reliance on and self-definition by the Japanese group. Again, certain elements of this paper may be criticised in relation to our research questions: the individuals were all young; many Japanese, especially those most affected by the returning, were reluctant to have their status known in this society, especially when they moved on from education to work. Moreover, these students had mostly been posted abroad with their parents, and were often cushioned from the daily life in the foreign culture by the nature of their surroundings.

It is one of the shortcomings of the literature on culture shock and returning that research has been restricted to specific groups such as the school students or tourists above. One paper more applicable to our research is that by Forster in 1994, describing the experiences of expatriate staff returning to the UK. Nevertheless, the paper is written from the perspective of business management, and many of its subjects had structures and strategies accessible for support to mitigate the 'cultural anomie and alienation when they return home' (Forster, 1994, p.408). However while the paper is focused mainly on business companies it does recognise the importance of another structure in facilitating adaptation on return, that is the communication within and support of the family.

The phenomenological study by Thompson and Christoffi (2006) addresses the issue of returning from abroad. The subjects were Cypriot students who had been away studying for between three and 10 years, and had then lived back in their home culture for between one to 5 years. The authors discuss the importance of social support (Martin, 1984 cited in Thompson and Christoffi, 2006, p.23) and how reverse culture shock is caused by changes that have occurred in the sojourner him or herself (Westwood, Lawrence, & Paul, 1986 cited in Thompson and Christoffi, 2006, p.23). Here, participants were interviewed and the narratives analysed. Three themes were derived: Shock/Adjustment; Freedom/restriction; and Changing/Static, with two sub-themes, External change and Internal change. The authors relate their findings to age, with most of the participants are in their early 20s, a time of 'developmental change that seems to have had significant impact on the participants in the current study' (Martin, 1984 cited in Thompson and Christoffi, 2006, p.35), with consequent changes in their sense of values. The authors are aware, however, of the limitations of their study as the participants come from Cyprus, a fast changing but relatively traditional culture. The paper stresses the very individual nature of their experiences (Thompson and Christoffi, 2006, p.36), yet make no attempt to tease out any of the individual factors from the group data.

Method

The research was undertaken as a project of collaboration with a woman, Maria, who told me about her experiences of returning from an extended period living abroad. My intention was to understand and articulate her experience and how she coped with her return to the UK. To better understand her process of re-acculturation and readjustment, I also asked her about her motives for leaving, about her time abroad, and about her reasons for

returning as they all impact on her phenomenological Self. In reviewing and interpreting her narrative, I used a phenomenological qualitative approach.

Choice of partner

I chose not to structure the interview, nor to give Maria a set of pre-prepared questions. I had told her the broad area of the subject, returning to the UK, but I did not want any pre-rehearsed responses. I am sensitive to the fact that remembering is an act of construction and imagination, coloured by recent experience, mood and rehearsal (Eysenck and Keane, 2000 p.214, p.315), and even the weather. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that on any other day, Maria's words might have been different: the day of our interview, a low but bright early-winter sun was shining so one can speculate what impact this had on the narrative. Although some time had passed since Maria returned from her 'sojourn' abroad, and many of her reactions would now be lost to memory, she fitted my criteria well.

Partner

Maria is a divorced mother in her late 30s. She is originally from Manchester and returned to Manchester several years ago after 15 years or more abroad. She has a young teenage son and lives only a few miles from her parents and the place she grew up. She works in the same college as myself, but in a different part of the campus; we meet no more than three or four times a week. I have a distant working relationship with her. She is a very competent and popular teacher and well liked as a colleague in her staffroom.

Qualitative research

Prior to the interview, I asked Maria for help with this project and she readily agreed. We chose a room at the college, meeting there at the end of a long and tiring day. I explained to Maria the following:

- Confidentiality: nobody would read this account except for the marker, my supervisor, a possible third party for standardisation and herself, should she wish.
- Anonymity: all names in her story would be changed, except place names. (We chose the pseudonym of Maria)
- Right to withdraw: Maria could withdraw at any point from the research prior to submission
- Recording of the interview: the interview would be recorded but would be safely and securely stored and on submission of the finished project, would be erased
- Right to access: Maria could read the script and the project at any time she wished
- Need for a break: if necessary, Maria could interrupt the interview and take a break
- Memories: should any of her story evoke upsetting memories, we discussed possible recourses, even if necessary, referral to a counsellor.

Maria confirmed she understood and agreed with all these points, and signed the form to this effect (Appendix II).

I had several ideas about what the interview was to cover: background; motivation for leaving Manchester; experience abroad in relation to life here; support and family here; day-to-day living here. My agenda, however, was secondary to the way Maria wanted to tell her story. To this end, I asked non-directive, open and sometimes ambiguous questions to facilitate her narrative, only occasionally asking for explanation of a term or

key point. The interview seemed to come to a natural end at about the half hour point, but after sharing some of my own feelings, her tale resumed.

The conversation was recorded on a mobile phone, password locked and encrypted. Following the meeting, this audio file was transferred to a laptop for analysis and again encoded, and the original file deleted. I listened to the story several times before transcribing it verbatim. This I did by listening to the tale and dictating the story myself to speech recognition software, a method I found expedient and which enabled me to concentrate on the intonation and emotional tone of her words. Examination was done using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Central to IPA is the use of a systemic thematic analysis to understand how the world appears to the participant. This qualitative form of analysis is a phenomenological approach that puts the subjects experience at the forefront. It is personal in that it focuses on the subject's meanings of their stories, embodied cognitive-affective and existential. It is also ideographic in that it seeks to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the individual in the particular context. Finally, it is hermeneutic, in that it aims to understand how the participants attempt to make sense of his or her experiences. This method requires a flexible approach and a willingness to look for patterns and use metaphor in the analysis. (Finlay, 2011, p140-142).

Analysis

In analysing Maria's narrative, I read and reread her script and tried listening numerous times to her story. I found the latter more difficult as the story contained a lot of emotional hue that tended to be subsumed by the initial, overall impression, so I found it easier to read her script and mark on her intonation patterns and other prosodic elements. Before beginning this write-up, I wished to be familiar enough with the material, Maria's story, that

I could make connections from memory. As Finlay points out 'the analysis process is often a messy one, involving both imaginary leaps of intuition as well as systematic working through of many iterative versions.' (Finlay, 2011, p228). I determined a number of elements that repeated through the narrative, and marked them up on the script. However, on each reading I found myself adding more of these elements and by the end of my analysis I had found some 18 sub-themes. In the Thompson and Christoffel (2010) study, they used only three themes; it seemed logical and practicable to follow this. However, I felt their sub-themes of External and Internal change would be spread across the elements of the themes, and it would not be logical to group them together. Nevertheless, I found that some of my elements fell into more than one of the themes depending on its context in the narrative. These I have highlighted in my findings, I decided therefore on the following three major themes:

Day-to-day existence

Fate

Agency

Day-to-day existence

I include here those aspects of her life that formed the daily life backdrop. This theme is less unified than the others although in analysis of the narrative, it had no few elements: work, colleagues, mother etc.

Money

you come back as a single parent you can't afford to do that (104)

I never earned that much money, but life was so much cheaper (312)

As an element of day-to-day, money plays a significant role. Maria alludes to it frequently, and as a single parent, it must have an existential significance. She explains some of the limitations of her life in terms of money: for example, the restrictions of her life in Manchester because *Everything is so expensive* (289) or *Everything costs money* (237) compared with abroad. Money is a means, however, a relief, to the escape to warmer and sunnier climes: *holidays are... It takes me a year to save up for* (317). She, moreover, explains how the lack of money prevents her from certain courses, for example, living where she would like to: *London is too expensive* (line 94).

Friends

An important element in dealing with the vicissitudes of life is one's support of friends, a fact understood by Maria. She cites her relationships with friends as a constant feature keeping her stable. *I think another thing as well abroad, you get a very close group of friends, don't you*(131). Maria's friendships have seen her through difficulties both abroad and on return to Manchester.

A caveat to this though, is the sense that many of her friends cannot, she feels, completely understand her as they cannot share her sense of joy in new experience.

But you do feel kind of, you can't really relate to them, and sometimes you don't like talking about what you've done because it sounds as if you're showing off, because I've done amazing things, actually amazing, I've walked on glaciers, yeah and it feels, you feel, like you've got nothing to say in their conversation. And they've got no conception of what you're talking about. Yeah, yes. (225 – 232)

This is, as she readily admits, one of the reasons she is drawn to people with similar experiences having lived in similarly exotic places, or are younger and have less

entrenched ways, or both: *So there were a lot of people who'd come back from abroad or been abroad, most people were younger than me, which I quite like, I like being around younger people. Erm, and I made some good friends luckily, erm (.) So, otherwise (.) I'd be struggling I think. (301 – 304)*

Work

Strongly connected to the element of friends is Maria's role at work. I know that she is a very capable at her job, reliable and valued colleague it comes as no surprise, therefore, that the energies she invests in her work are repaid. Work is important in. It is significant, though, that throughout her experiences, work as a TEFL teacher has been a constant, one that grounds Maria and gives her a sense of control over her daily life. As a personal observation, the TEFL world has many manifestations but, with its staffing of expatriates, all speaking a common language and promoting a largely humanistic, liberal set of values it has a sub-culture of its own.

Partners

Poignantly, Maria makes few references to partners, only five, in her story. There is a comment about one at the beginning of her tale (line 16) and mention of the existence of her ex-partner in Chile: little information about either individual is forthcoming, but only a mention of the role they play in motivating her. The fact, though, that Maria is not currently in a relationship is perhaps the reason that this important element is given little emphasis in Maria's tale.

Place

Maria makes many comparisons between Manchester and places abroad where she has lived. They can be grouped thus:

Manchester good	8 instances
Manchester bad	22 instances
Abroad good	22 instances
Abroad bad	15 instances

Obviously the smallest group is the first: positive comments about Manchester. These, moreover, tend to be historic, about the Manchester of when Maria was young, the Manchester that she has introjected, part of her early identity: *People used to laugh because I, I used to say, I'm from Manchester before the UK. Partly because of the football, I'm proud I'm from Manchester* (109-110). In contrast to this, most of her negative comments about her hometown are about now; for example, *I came back to Manchester, I just thought it was dull, in comparison* (148).

Curiously, the number of positive comments about abroad is, in my interpretation of Maria's words, equal to the negative one's about Manchester. It is not just the words that Maria uses that signpost her happiness with abroad, but her tone of voice, becoming louder and less confiding: it gives her pleasure to talk about her happier times abroad, about the places, the things she did, the way she was able to negotiate her way through life. In contrast, though, negative comments about abroad are not a few: however, they mostly relate to the day-to-day problems at the beginning of her travels, and all those troubles at the end when she was having difficulties with her son's father.

Fate

The next theme is Fate: those elements that are seemingly out of her control, and yet underpin her experience of each phase: before, abroad and return. While the theme includes several elements, such as family and son and obligation, by far the biggest is

simply labeled Fatalism; within this category are those elements that shape experience, those that she feels external, either physically or as projections of her inner life.

Family

There is a fairly section in which Maria talks about her family. Again her words suggest a sense of mutual obligation and support: *'you can always put on your family'*

Maria reveals how she sees her mother as a source of struggle, possibly a reflection of herself or source of some symbiosis; Maria's mother comes across as a character very like herself, doing what is right with similar psychological drivers: Be Strong, Work Hard, Please Others. In contrast, Maria's father is a more passive even disengaged figure, but what is not said about him might indicate his role in Maria's life, which is discussed later. This vagueness of the father's role is emphasised as Maria talks about what her mother does: *my mum used to, you know travel across the world to see her grandson (87)*; and what her son does: *Peter is playing (473)*. In contrast, she talks about what her father *is*: *My dad is happy to have somebody to talk about.... (212)* This omission is further underlined when she talks about what he doesn't do: *He's of a generation that doesn't, he's never said a word to me about all the... trauma. (208)*. Maria's father seems to have few expectations of his daughter: *My dad is happy to have somebody to talk about Manchester United with (213)*, she says matter-of-factly. Does the father's attitude suggest his hope for a son rather than a daughter? If so, it would explain aspects of a Don't Be You script message, and a need for Maria to get away so as to be recognized as herself.

Suggestion of Maria's lack of control and abdication to fate come from some of her other comments about her family, particularly her son, for example: *He just started secondary school, you know you can't really be (.) going, and racking off around the world although I would if I got a good job (189)* it is not as if she is blaming but recognising the

responsibility and obligation and how her options are limited: this is an altogether Adult perception but not unconnected with a Child appeal.

Finance

Some, of Maria's comments about money can be included within this theme. Here, money is not the day-to-day commodity, but as the basis for a solid life. Maria talks about property and having '*the other problem is you've missed the boat on buying a house and the rest of it so you're miles behind financially, buggered, so you're stuck with poor quality rented accommodation*' (line 224). She contrasts her own situation with that of her friend, who has had a house bought for her by her own parents. '*I think her parents bought her house so she does what she wants and she doesn't have any responsibilities with children so. It's a different life, isn't it?*' (405) Maria alludes to this without any suggestion of jealousy in her voice; another example of her stoicism or Don't be important script message.

Time

A third aspect of this Fate, is that of temporality. Maria refers to time, and age, and ageing as areas of frustration and inevitability. I am moved by the strength in her voice, yet no matter what she feels when she discusses this element, her actions to cling to the past and her youth will, like those of the daughters of Danaus, come to naught. This life is a struggle; one hears the Child's voice. This awareness of time is not just personal, but extends to her family to, most notably her parents, *They're more elderly now* (86). She talks, too, about how time is running away: *I had more life, more energy when I was abroad. I don't know whether that's (.) I think that's also tied in with my kind of age and other things.* (271) Maria can no more carry the energy of youth than a sieve can hold water.

Fatalism

There are elements of fatalism within Maria's account she explains some of the events in her life in terms of inevitability. For example:

I was lucky (134)

you know what (148)

when you take (158)

as a single parent (176)

Again, while many of these may be based in reality the message that comes through in the voice is that of her Child. And with an application to fate there is the childlike expression of regret, *'is you've missed the boat (2 to 9)* and *you're totally out of it (229)*. Maria's Child complains, *I think I'm becoming a bit boring. Yeah. (275)*, as children complain that adults are boring.

Weather

Another frequently mentioned element of her story is the weather.

It was raining I was fed up with Manchester (5)

fed up with Manchester particularly the weather (xx)

Invariably this Manchester bad/abroad good dichotomy is evidenced although towards the end of the interview she does complain about particularly bad summer in Chile (445). Such is the frequency of this subject that it suggests that other psychological processes are at play.

Maria mentions the weather and the light no fewer than 16 times in her narrative. It has a significance that is revealed by her voice and facial expression each time she does so.

day after day, it was raining (6)

This emphasis on the weather is, to me, reminiscent of the weather in King Lear:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!” (King Lear, Act 3, Scene 2)

Thus, it is Shakespeare's frequent allusion to the phenomenon that informs the audience, and possibly Lear himself, of the state of the world and as a mirror to the 'unnaturalness' of his mind.

Both Maria and King Lear both seem to be playing a role in an existential drama, both are trying to make sense of the world. Whereas in Lear the weather reflects the lack of accordance with the natural order, for Maria her own 'natural' state, or the one she aspires to, is reflected in this atmospheric scenery she describes. Her frequent reference to the weather is indication of her affective state, and one over which she is not conscious of having control.

This metaphor of weather as a reflection of affective state is reinforced by her comment about her final summer in Chile:

yeah, I just realised, I remember the summer in Chile. I was fed up to the back teeth because, I remember it got very hot from about October, November and it was hot continually and no rain from November to the end of March. I had enough of it. (417)

It is her only negative comment on the weather abroad: by this time, her life had been soured – had become stormy – by the actions of her ex-partner.

Likewise, the sun and the light, also frequent and recurrent and connected themes may be included in the Weather, or may represent something even more central to Maria:

it was so sunny, so we went to Spain (13)

the light is massively (important) (121)

it's beautiful, just blue sky (124)

I miss that now, just the physical kind of aspect of the light, and the sun (140)

Each time Maria says this, it is with an emphasis, almost a longing, like a child talking of an imaginary country, or an older person talking about childhood: in my mind, it takes on a spiritual dimension. In contrast with the red brick, *I can't bear I find it so could depressing* (138), of Manchester, the buildings of Santiago, *the buildings were white to reflect the sun* (138) are imbued with the numinous aspect of Light.

Taken together, these two elements of weather and sun run through much of what Maria says, making the backdrop to her story. Where she talks about her day-to-day life in Manchester the weather is always negative: *you know, you knew it's gonna rain* (149) and the light, *it is so dark early* (165). When the sun does shine, it is either abroad, *I think it is that light* (326), or inside Maria's head, such as where she describes her apartment in Chile, an emotional description.

Whether the light and the sun might represent love or father or God, or merely Maria's own disappearing youth, with rain and grey and cloud representing age and aging, it is hard to determine. However, the youngest manifestation of Maria in the story is the young woman who *'was fed up of Manchester, particularly of the weather. I can still picture it to this day, picture it, lying in my bed in my flat, and just hearing the rain'* (4-5). The light was then an element missing in her life, one for which she would seek.

3. Agency

The final theme I have labelled Agency, as I see it as examples of Maria taking control of life and dealing with all those elements described as problematic in the literature review and developing her own sense of Self.

Relationships

Maria is vague about her partners, but that does not diminish the effect of the relationships themselves, which profoundly affect her experience. Her first is in Spain (15) and the latter in Chile. While both seem to have been beset with difficulties from external factors — the former economic considerations while the latter cultural expectations — they each give Maria a sense of agency in her life. In the first one this is to shape her struggle and develop her own control and in the second, to take on the injustice and patriarchal legal system.

Language

These schematic elements, and others under this heading are laced with the development of Self through language, a necessary feature of adjustment. She uses language as a gauge of how well she fits into the place. This is poorly in Spain, as her travels begin; she later alludes to her difficulties in language learning — *I'm not a natural language learner at all* (266), as if resigned to the struggle of survival in a new place. This contrasts greatly though with her later reference to her linguistic ability to take on the legal system in Chile (*my legal Spanish got good* (71)) indicating that her sense of agency through language has been achieved. Maria is seemingly not unaware of this sense of achievement and self-development when she says, *I quite enjoy those little challenges that you get when you are somewhere else – often language, aren't they?* (252). She emphasises this, too, when

she laments that she has denied her son of this element of self-development, by not encouraging him to speak his first language. This, though it is qualified with her comment about the possible psychological impact of the language on her son, when she says, his *dad spoke to him in Spanish* (201).

While Peter, Maria's son was mentioned in the Family element above, her relationship with him begins to dominate the last part of the narrative. He has become a major motivating factor for Maria. He is the reason she lives in Manchester; he is also the reason she does what she does day-to-day, and why she goes to see her friend and her daughter in Spain every year:

I do think that's probably the only thing that keeps me going. We go and stay with somebody that I worked with in Chile. Her daughter is exactly the same age as Peter, they grew up together, they've known each other since there were about, six months old. So that's the only thing, I think, that gets me through, (317-321)

Maria talks, too, about Peter changing and growing. Inevitably, her life will change, too. Peter's maturing is the key to her own independence.

Motivation

The motivation described here is extrinsic motivation, those features that Maria talks about that she feels drive her to make a decision.

I don't know if I am looking for another challenge but I need, I need something to change, (366)

I think I need something to give me a little bit of motivation (367)

The final utterance, though, sums up her reason for leaving Chile and returning to the UK despite her underlying wishes.

At least I'm not in that, I'm not back in court. I'm not on the same continent as a certain person, you know. But that's. So at first that kept me going, I was thankful for that, (358)

It was much more of a push, that got me out of Chile but there is also that as well. Yes, but I still had this thing about wanting to leave Manchester, (92)

Ambition

I have used this title to describe the intrinsic aspects of Maria's motivation:

there's got to be more to life than this (7)

I'd always had Argentina in my mind, I'd always wanted to go to Patagonia I'd read the Patagonian Express (37)

From both before she left for abroad and on return, Maria has dreams to be fulfilled. her earlier ones might seem a little grander, but she maintains her ability to think ahead and realize these dreams.

New Year's resolution is to start ..(445)

I see this element as key part of Maria's sense of Self and her strength of character and purpose.

Autonomy

Maria demonstrates a strong sense of autonomy throughout the narrative, starting with the decision to not merely accept her state of mind in Manchester at the beginning or her narrative. She makes the decision to seek what's missing in her life rather than, say, self-medicate. This determination is constantly reinforced in her narrative, with such comments as *they wouldn't, they wouldn't give me a job, kept hassling them, and hassling them (42)*.

She shows, moreover, her intellectual strength when she says:

there's something really nice isn't there, about being abroad because even when you've been somewhere, because I was in Chile seven years in the end, so you know you get used to it. But there's always that little bit of, you're not exactly sure what might happen today, you know there might be something they have to negotiate some kind of challenge, or something unusual happens (143)

An inference from this could be that the reason for her move abroad, and disaffection with being back in Manchester, is curiosity: *yes, the social signs very different. I think it's just, you know, I quite enjoy those little challenges that you get when you are somewhere else – often language, aren't they – or working out signs, working out things (253)*

There is an element of a feedback, too, in that the greater the challenge, the greater the sense of confidence when she meets it: *Abroad I think I did more interesting jobs when I was abroad as well, more stressful jobs actually in the end, as well. But, erm, more responsibility, responsibility and hard work, erm, yeah. (331)*

The more Maria exercises her Adult agency, the stronger it becomes and the more confident she is. Indeed she makes this point quite explicit: *after I'd been abroad for quite a long time a lot of people said I seemed like a lot more kind of confident. And you do get confidence, I suppose when you've dealt with things like that (262)*

In each of these comments, Maria's voice changes, becoming louder and firmer, as if she is putting on the character of herself at that stage of her life. This contrasts with her comments towards the end of the interview where she says, *I'm looking forward to the summer holidays (laughter). I feel I have to have a way out, if you like, otherwise I couldn't*

keep going (laughter). (413): here the tone is self-mocking and the laughter allows humour.

Pastimes

Maria demonstrates her agency through various structured activities. There cannot be many women in their late 30s who take up boxing and, as well as relieving stress, it gives Maria a very physical and immediate sense of control.

but it's very therapeutic to punch (.). And I did that soon after I came back and it was very therapeutic. To get rid of your stress, to, to punch and kick really hard. It was really therapeutic. And the yoga is just great. Again about stress. Yes I do as much yoga as I can (440 – 443)

Discussion

The findings of this research both support the results of previous studies on reverse culture shock and extend them. Maria's experiences are very much in accord with the literature examined, but differ in several aspects, such as Maria's age, that she spent longer abroad than anybody in any of the literature reviewed, and that Maria's motivation was largely intrinsic.

It is apparent that Maria experienced some of the initial elements of culture shock described by Stuart and Leggat (1998), from life in southern Spain to dealing with a paternalistic legal system that she had to fight. It is clear, too, that reliance on her friends both whilst abroad — fellow expatriates — and later on return to the UK, as explained by Yoshida et al. (2001). However, Maria's age on both leaving and returning, and the lack of

formal structures mentioned by Yoshida et al. (2001), barring the support of the school in Buenos Aires, make our results different.

A major area in which this study differed from that in the literature review is motivation. In all the studies described, motivation is largely extrinsic, or external: the sojourners are either students wishing to gain better qualifications and encouraged by peers, parents and teachers or children and families whose movement is dictated by parents or work. Maria's motivation, on the other hand, is intrinsic, to such a degree that it becomes a major subtheme in the analysis.

The authors discuss how 'Those who return home usually do not expect to have readjustment issues since home is not "a new place." It is a shock, therefore, when home is seen through a different lens' (Martin, 1984 cited in Thompson and Christoffi, 2006,)

As Maria began her narrative, set in the historical context of 20 years ago, she does give some indication of the culture shock of living in southern Spain, as she describes the difficult conditions there. One can infer some of Stewart and Legatts' aspects of culture shock: rejection of the new culture and feelings of impotence. It is plausible that this is not unaffected by Maria being in a relationship with a fellow teacher, a native speaker of English, and therefore probably a fellow countryman: she is still taking her culture with her. Maria is less encumbered when she relocates to Argentina. Here, in the completely new environment, Maria seems to have found some degree of contentment despite or because of the many new cultural elements: geographical, climatic and social, for example, the outdoor lifestyle and violent football tribalism.

Maria's experience supports some of Foster's (1999) work to, in that it emphasises the importance of the family in re-adapting to her hometown. Maria's account has more in common with the findings of Sullivan and Christofi (1999) unsurprisingly as this too, was a phenomenological study.

It was my expectation that I would be obtaining phenomenological data on returning to a home town, and make reference to extant literature, one I could interpret with the benefit of my own experience and one that could support me. I should have realised this when I found myself dwelling more on the past as the present.

I have divided the narrative into three main headings according to theme; this could have been done just as easily by using voice tone. One wonders if Maria is aware of the degree to which she alters the prosodic aspects depending on intent, although as a teacher of language it comes, possibly, with the job. Moreover, More than once, have my neat themes and elements been upset by the awareness of something else, some other psychological factors, whilst writing this.

Maria shows an adaptation to the cultures abroad that is remarkable. I, however, would suggest that, initially, it was not the culture per se that Maria adapts to, but her interpretation of it; the culture is filtered through her needs and desires. Maria is seeking a culture with the characteristics lacking in her life. In the Cultural Parent (1983), Drego describes the personality of a culture in terms that parallel the structure of an person's personality. She describes how an individual's Cultural Parent influences daily decisions, a 'Cultural Parent is located both in a social group and in the individual' (ibid, p.225). It is reasonable to expect that this is a transactional process in which daily decisions influence the cultural parent.

The return from South America must have left Maria's child is feeling bereft, but she has tried to fill this gap with structures of other cultures, not least the disciplines of yoga and boxing. One can speculate further on how her sense of Belonging is enhanced in these organisations with the contrasts of the respective female and male cultural elements.

Naughton and Tudor (2014) also discuss the issue of identity & belonging and cultural script. They examine this from the perspective of race. For Maria who, though, chose to live in the two most European of South American countries, race might not be an issue; however, Maria is still part of an outgroup there, albeit one with social privileges. The point is made that the cultural reference points (church, media, music etc) influence identity and script: changes would inevitably create a change in identity. Maria's return to the UK takes her back to the culture of her childhood in which she is no longer seemingly part of the outgroup. Maria does point out that she could never fit in in Chile due to her size and features; perhaps it is easier to be obviously different than to carry the difference around inside her back in the UK.

It is worth noting that none of the studies examined mentioned religion as a factor in maintaining a sense of Self, either on going abroad or returning. This element was lacking from Maria's experience, too. This is in some contrast with my own experience where I have seen expatriates revive interest in their home religion and its rituals, or become involved in a religious organisation of the new country. The latter group I have witnessed take that religion back with them to their home country and used it to support themselves.

Maria is an articulate and reflective individual, who fitted my requirements very well. She is not unaware of some of her own feelings of helplessness and emotional lack. She says

she is affected by the winter in Manchester and the lack of sun. She explains how she has sought help, hoping that the problem is organic and simple: *a quick fix* (461). While yearning for this quick fix, Maria admits to herself that she has her dissatisfaction with current life in Manchester is psychological. She has sought help from her doctor, and requested some talking therapy. However, the result of this request plays again into her belief in Fate and script message exact sex that she is not in Control: her therapist turns out to be young and intent on providing quick CBT. Maria feels she is patronising and one who, in her estimation, cannot hope to understand the experience of a middle-aged woman. These comments elicit sympathy within me: aware of the need for therapy she lacks the financial resources to obtain it and so is rebuffed by her sense of fatalism; Maria seeks self-knowledge, but cannot lacks the resources; through yoga and friends and family and boxing she may begin to find a peace with herself. One begins to see a sense of existential crisis, one that is only remedied by the. She ceases her counselling as she seems to lack belief in the process and, more importantly, the holiday time approaches and with anticipation of the warm embrace of the Sun around her, her depression dissipates: *But it was no good at all really. (Raise voice) but then the summer came and I cancelled* (463)

Although grouped under different headings, Maria's comments about her environment, from the outside of buildings to the interior of her flat, from the rain in Manchester to the sun in Santiago, make up the greatest number of elements in her story. As I read her script and hear her voice in my head, I cannot help but feel that she is describing more than merely a memory of what is around her. The analogy of King Lear is, to me, striking: the weather is a way of describing Maria's inner feelings. This conflict of good versus bad weather, therefore, fills me with a sense of sadness for Maria, as the weather is spoken of as something distant, something beyond her control - as indeed it is – something in the

past to which there is no returning. Her frequent allusion to light and the sun reinforces the psychic symbolism of the narrative and induces in me a feeling, of yearning for love and for a father. Equally, it is interesting that I should have been reminded of King Lear by this atmospheric analogy for comparison does not end with aspects of meteorology. Central to the play is Lear's relationship with his youngest daughter and its breakdown: the father who cuts his daughter off from his love because of her honesty and pragmatism. This is a common theme in Western traditional stories, like that of Cap o' Rushes (Jacobs, 1967, pp. 51-57) and many other examples. It is interesting to speculate that this traditional, indeed ancient, motif endures in 21st-century, suburban, Wi-Fi enabled, British culture.

Conclusion

A qualitative analysis has a concrete set of principles, with a research question or hypothesis to be tested. The qualities of qualitative research are less restrained: it is almost as if we start with a research question of 'what happens if?' A comparison of the themes in the subject's narrative with those of general psychological explanation of culture shock and reverse culture shock indicate that there might be something of a mismatch in this research. My focus had been on the general psychological impact of being a returnee, whereas the interview narrative gives a great insight into the psychological processes of one individual, insights that cannot necessarily be extended to others; one should not be surprised by this. Moreover, the experience has shown the limitations of quantitative analysis. For example, Yoshida et al.'s (1999) finding was that students with better 'family communication' fare better in the transition from international school context to the Japanese school. This now seems apparent that these individuals have a more robust

some sense of belonging to their own group, the family; it is the issue of Belonging, too, that seems to lurk beneath much of what Maria says.

Clearly, within the short period that Maria spoke about her lived experiences and her motivations, much was revealed that Maria was not conscious of. It is possible that my own interpretations are inappropriate. Nevertheless, such is the existential significance of the issues that Maria is recounting, it would seem inevitable that the account is informed by psychological and psychodynamic currents. On another, cloudier day, with another interviewer, Maria's account and the subsequent interpretations might be different, however.

Finally, I have drawn a parallel between Maria's language and that in the Shakespeare drama of King Lear. I have extended this analogy to discuss the issues of love between Lear and his daughter, and made a comparison with a motif from traditional folklore. Given Maria's need for Belonging and her 'Don't Be You' script messages, I feel I could extrapolate this idea to suggest that Maria's father is in want of a son, and Maria is unconsciously aware of this. However, whereas, King Lear remained estranged from his daughter, it is conceivable that there will be a psychological reconciliation of Maria's father with herself, through her son, Peter.

Reflection

I had set out to investigate the phenomenon of coming back, of reverse culture shock, to stepping back into a changed world. I had put my search terms into the EBSCO database: abroad, phenomenological, returnee, culture shock, reverse culture shock, existential, etc. I had found a small body of material relating to this subject, much of it focused on quantitative research, and on distinct groups that were inevitably somewhat different from Maria. I should, I feel strongly now, have searched differently. I even considered re-writing my literature review with the results of a new search, but that would have been a case of the results determining the method; putting the cart before the horse.

I found the analysis of Maria's story very difficult at first as I felt her tale quite depressing. I suspect this was because I was focusing on the Fate theme. By the time I came to the last theme, of Agency, my feelings about the conversation had changed greatly, and my respect and admiration for Maria had grown, too. It was halfway through the coding of the narrative that I began to have doubts about the overall project itself. I had set out to discover how a person could readjust to coming back to a particular place after an extended period away, but I began to feel that this was not the subject of Maria's narrative; she was discussing the subject of Belonging. I would have liked to go back and redo my literature review in the light of this, but I felt I had to accept what I had found.

During the interview, I was surprised how easy it was to talk to Maria, and how readily we developed a rapport. I later discovered that, despite the decades difference in our ages, we both grew up within a couple of miles of each other, in the suburbs of South Manchester. This, and the shared values, the same social economic background, as well as similar experiences, contributed to this ease of communication.

I have learned a lot about Maria and the problems of learning and returning, and the sense of anomie that can evolve in a relatively new suburban environment. Mostly, though, through my analysis of Maria's words, and from my background reading, I have learnt a lot about the way I handled, or mishandled my own return and its impact on myself and my family.

Although I did share some of my experience with Maria (lines 385 and 416), I felt that I did not want to lead her. I feel my presence in the interpretation is inevitable and recognizable and wonder if I was not influenced by elements of transference in the co-creative process.

My final words go to Maria: wherever you go, you take yourself with you. I agree. But the narrative tells us nothing if not that the Maria striding across the sunlit glacier of Patagonia is not exactly the same Maria as the one sitting in the car in the rain waiting for her son's football to finish.

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools....., and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.

King Lear, Act I, scene 2



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Appendices:

Appendix I: Project Proposal Form

Appendix II: Participant Consent Form

Appendix III: Transcript of Interview