

Return Migration to Asmara, Eritrea: Readjustment Challenges

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Abstract

A sample of 600 household heads who migrated from Eritrea to countries around the world and then returned to Asmara following independence in 1993 were interviewed to ascertain their most important pre-return and post-return challenges and how well they were readjusting to new environments in Asmara. While living in exile, their most important problems were socio-cultural, but when they returned home they were economic. The relative importance of the kinds of challenges faced varied by the host country or region (Ethiopia, Sudan, other African countries, the Middle East, Europe, United States). The best predictors of successful readjustment on return were fewer stops on the way home, more years of education, more languages spoken, higher monthly income, working more hours, and more visits home while living abroad. These results have clear policy implications for those government and non-government agencies involved in aiding returnees in their readjustment.

Keywords: Readjustment; refugees; return migration; Asmara; Eritrea;

Introduction

Although international return migration is an important aspect in the migration cycle, it has been relatively neglected in migration literature ¹ For example; Cohen's comprehensive survey makes sparse reference to return migration.²

Return migration is a difficult topic to research due to lack of data and problems with identifying returnees' locations.³ This paper examines some aspects of return migration to Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, using interviews with 600 spontaneous but voluntary returnees, who came to reside in Asmara following Eritrean independence, from 1993 to 2001,. Specifically, it studies their pre- and post-return readjustment problems, and personal characteristics associated with readjustment. It complements a paper that examined the characteristics of returnees and their reasons for returning (.⁴

Return Migration and Adjustment

Adjustment in the context of migration, according to Scott and Scott, refers to the “continuous ability of migrants to survive in and cope with the environments they pass through or settle in”.⁵ Return migrants usually face resettlement or readjustment problems when they arrive back home. If they are returning to a developing country, they may come from a region with relatively high living standards to a non-prosperous region characterized by few employment opportunities, low levels of education, and poor social service facilities. They may also come back from countries whose norms, values, and social structures are incompatible with those of the home country. Thus returnees face socio-economic and psychological challenges as they attempt to reintegrate into their home society. The degree of success in coping with these problems partly depends on socio-cultural demographic and spatial characteristics of returnees. In addition, the coping success of returnees is a reflection of the experiences they gained at all stages of migration, including any pre-return adjustment steps taken in their host countries.

Policy makers, institutions, and all government and non-government organizations who have direct and indirect contacts with returnees need to understand the most frequently observed problems returnees face while abroad and in their home country. This information is useful for such organizations and institutions in their attempt to help returnees, by providing them with material support and psychological advice to cope with their new environments. Donor organizations in receiving and sending countries or regions of returnees need to find out how returnees' intrinsic attributes are associated with their pre- and post- readjustment challenges. To that end, this paper explores the readjustment challenges of a sample of 600 spontaneous but voluntary returnees to Eritrea following independence from Ethiopia in 1993. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What pre-return and post-return readjustment problems did Eritrean returnees to Asmara encounter?
2. How are pre-return and post-return readjustment problems related to the host countries of returnees?
3. How are the personal characteristics of returnees associated with their degree of post-return adjustment?

Substantial literature exists on the problems migrants face when they attempt to adjust to new environments. Some of this literature describes adjustment challenges of migrants in their host countries. This factor is pertinent to this study, as the decisions of migrants to return home and the problems they face in returning depend in part on how well they coped while they were away. As Stahl indicates, socio-cultural adaptation and

economic integration in host countries depend on a range of issues such as access to the labor market, vertical occupational mobility, and level of education and language skills.⁶ Gendt identifies the pre-return adjustment challenges for the majority of Greeks, Italians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Turks, and Yugoslavs who came back home from western Europe, as mainly, the inability to utilize savings, lack of employment services and training centers, and poor access to social services such as housing, health, and transport.⁷ The marital status and age of returnees also impact on their readjustment profiles. To take two of several more specific examples, Berry and Blonde found that married migrants from Canada experienced fewer adjustment problems than those who were single, and Nicasso and Pale found that older migrants from Indochina had more psychiatric problems than younger migrants from the same region.⁸

Existing literature also provides paradigms of the problems returnees face once they are back in their own country.⁹ Gmelch discovered that the need to establish new friends, a slow pace of life, lack of social services, and lack of employment opportunities were the major deterrents to full integration for the majority of returnees to Western Ireland.¹⁰ The problems that Norwegian returnees from Egypt encountered emanated from their inability to compare correctly the situations in both home and host country and a failure to calculate the appropriate time to return.¹¹ Fear of social disgrace by those who had not done well abroad, lack of job availability, changed personalities, and climatic conditions were the main barriers to readjustment among returnees to the Caribbean.¹² A low standard of living, housing shortages, a long wait for jobs, and family conflicts (particularly between husbands and wives) were the major re-integration problems for most Southeast Asian returnees.¹³

The old and the new characteristics of returnees often influence how they cope with new challenges. Marmora and Gurrieri and Topscott in studies of Rio Della Plat and Namibia, respectively, indicate that individual attributes are among the major factors related to post-return resettlement challenges for most returnees.¹⁴ As an example, in Namibia, Preston found that the inability of the majority of returnees to speak fluent English was the major deterrent to obtaining education and jobs.¹⁵ In a study of returnees to the Dominican Republic, it was discovered that females, younger age groups, employed people, and economic migrants had readjusted faster than males, older age groups, and non-economic migrants.¹⁶

Government policies in both home and host countries play a role in how well returnees readjust.¹⁷ Returnees to Kerala, India blamed their own government for the resettlement problems they faced during the post-return period.¹⁸ The failure of the local government and other agencies to support returnees, by facilitating integration measures, was the major problem for the majority of Italian returnees who migrated to several European countries.¹⁹ Aid agencies have also been criticized for being slow or not providing assistance at all.²⁰ For example, in their study of the causes of resettlement problems among Algerian and Senegalese returnees, Bouhouche and Diatta and Mbow, respectively, found that the reluctance of relief organizations such as the UNHCR to assist the returnees with basic necessities was the main cause of their readjustment problems.²¹

Methods

Study Area

Eritrea lies in the Horn of Africa, and is bounded by the Red Sea and the countries of Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti (Figure 1). More than a million of the estimated 3.5 million population lives outside the country; many of the exiles are refugees.²² The study site is Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, located in Zoba Maekel, the central part of the country. The city is elevated at 2,343 meters above sea level and has a pleasant climate. Approximately 400,000 people inhabit an area of approximately 80 square kilometers.²³ The origins of the modern city lie in the urbanization process begun during Italian occupation. At the time of independence, Asmara was chosen as the capital city. It has become one of the biggest commercial, administrative, and communication centers. It is divided into four sub-zones and twenty administrative centers: Northeast (five centers); Southwest or Debubawi Keih (five centers); Northwest (six centers); and Southeast (four centers).

Study Design

Although secondary data used in this study were collected from various government and non-governmental agencies, the principal findings are based on a survey of 600 household heads who were spontaneous but voluntary returnees to Asmara. The size of this group was estimated to be approximately 16,500 from records kept by the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC). This number was reduced to approximately 12,000 potential respondents by eliminating those who:

- (1) Had returned from exile before 1990, were less than 18 years old, or had lived in Asmara less than six months preceding the interview;
- (2) Were not documented in one of the 20 administrative centers and therefore could not be traced locally;
- (3) had moved within Asmara or away from the city without informing the authorities;
- (4) were organized returnees misclassified as spontaneous; and
- (5) Stated that they were not sure if they were returning permanently.

A five percent sample of the 12,000 potential respondents was chosen based on population proportions in the 20 administrative centers. Within each center, respondents were chosen systematically, beginning with a random number.

The survey was conducted between August 2000 and June 2001. A pilot survey that lasted over a three-week period was conducted in each of the 20 administrative centers of the study area by five interviewers. Some modifications, but no major changes, resulted from the pilot study. Then 20 interviewers residing in all the administrative centers were recruited. Each had completed at least 12th grade, spoke the dominant local language (Tigrigna) fluently, and had an average speaking ability in English; priority was given to those who spoke more than three languages. Permission to conduct interviews was obtained from the statistical department of the municipal center of the city. Seven additional interviewers were recruited during the survey to aid in collecting questionnaires, as well as coding and sorting the raw data.

Respondents were asked to report their most important problem while living in a host country. Pre-return challenges were condensed into five categories:

(1) War, detention, lack of security, political crises, and deteriorating diplomatic relations between home and host countries are among the political challenges.

(2) *Socio-cultural* problems include family conflicts, interactions with others, psychological problems, stress, loneliness, depression, family separation, and marriage to non-Eritreans.

(3) Low salaries, housing and education problems, lack of employment, unsatisfactory working conditions, a low standard of living, and financial dependence on others fall into the category of *economic* challenges.

(4) A fourth category includes problems of *health, aging, and acclimatization*.

(5) Those who reported *no problems* at all make up the final category.

Respondents were also asked to state their most important post-return readjustment problems. These were condensed into the same categories as for pre-return challenges.

A set of ten questionnaire items was used to assess respondents' degree of readjustment to life in Asmara:

1. Attitudes toward non-returnees.
2. Overall activities compared to fellow returnees and non-returnees living in the same neighborhood or administrative unit.
3. Desire to have a large number of children (more than five).
4. Cultural, linguistic, and religious similarities with the recipient society.
5. Degree of self-confidence.
6. Degree of resettlement.
7. Possibilities of investing capital brought from exile.
8. Re-emigration plan.

9. Readiness to help others if needed.
10. Time spent for recreation that did not affect work.

Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 5 as follows:

- (1) Very poor,
- (2) Poor,
- (3) Fair,
- (4) Good, and
- (5) Very good.

A degree of readjustment scale was derived from this information by adding the scores on the ten items and dividing by ten.

Information was gathered from sample respondents on ten variables that were potential predictors of degree of readjustment.

- (1) *Age* was the age in years of respondents at the time of the survey.
- (2) *Household size* includes all those who live and eat together under the same roof, regardless of family ties.
- (3) *Language* is the number of languages spoken by respondents.
- (4) *Education* was recorded as the total years of various types of schooling.
- (5) *Status of employment* measures the average number of months a respondent worked in the years between return to Asmara and the time of interview.
- (6) *Income* records the amount in Nacfa (New Eritrean currency issued in 1997) a respondent currently received per month.
- (7) *Time in exile* is the years the respondent lived outside Eritrea (although they might have visited the country during that time).

(8) *Friendship contacts* were defined to be the number of times returnees met with friends per week without affecting their jobs or other personal matters.

(9) *Home visit* refers to the number of times respondents came home during exile to visit family and friends and carry out other activities.

(10) *Number of stops* is the number of times a returnee stopped on the way back from a host country.

Pre-return Challenges

The most often mentioned pre-return set of challenges was socio-cultural, reported by about one-third (32.8%) of the sample (Table 1). In order of importance, this category was followed by political problems (22.7%), no problems (18.7%), economic problems (17.0%), and health/aging/acclimatization (8.8%). Females experienced higher proportions of socio-cultural or no problems; males had higher proportions of political and health/aging/acclimatization problems; economic problems were experienced about equally by both sexes.

Pre-return Challenges by Host Country

Table 2 shows the percentage of pre-return challenges experienced by those living in various host countries. The highest percentage that had socio-cultural problems were those who lived in the Middle East (49.1%) and the United States (47.1%), followed by those who lived in Europe (36.4%), other African countries (35.3%), Sudan (34.4%), and Ethiopia (27.7%). Political problems were quite important for those living next door to Eritrea in Ethiopia (34.2%), but were not very important for those residing elsewhere (about one-tenth). For returnees without problems the ranking was from the most important to least important countries or regions namely, other African countries

(35.2%), Europe and Sudan (22.7%), the Middle East (21.0%), United States (17.6%), and Ethiopia (15.0%). Those living in Sudan experienced the highest percentage of economic problems (23.9%), followed by Europe (18.2%), Ethiopia (14.7%), the Middle East (12.3%), other African countries (11.8%), and United States (5.9%). Health/aging/acclimatization problems were most important in the United States (17.6%) and Europe (13.6%) and not very important elsewhere.

Post-return Challenges

Economic problems, reported by almost half the sample (45.7%), were clearly the most important set of post-return challenges (Table 3). “No problems” and socio-cultural problems were reported by one-fifth of the respondents (20.2% and 20.0%, respectively), followed by health/aging/acclimatization (13.0%), and political problems (0.7%). Males reported higher proportions of no problems and health/aging/acclimatization problems; females reported higher proportions of socio-cultural and economic problems.

Post-return Challenges by Host Country

Table 4 displays post-return readjustment challenges by host country lived in prior to return. Those who lived in Sudan and Ethiopia experienced the highest proportions of economic problems (51.7% and 47.2%, respectively), followed by those who came back from other African countries (35.3%), the Middle East (35.1%), the U.S. (29.4%), and Europe (22.7%). The highest proportions of socio-cultural problems were reported by those who returned from the U.S. (35.3%), followed by returnees from Europe (31.8%), Sudan and the Middle East (22.8% each), other African countries (23.5%), and Ethiopia (16.9%). No problems were reported in the highest proportions by those returning from Europe (27.3%), followed by returnees from other African countries

(23.5%), the Middle East (21.1%), Ethiopia (20.8%), Sudan (17.8%), and the U.S. (17.6%). Health/aging/acclimatization problems were reported in order of importance from the following countries: Middle East (19.3%), Europe (18.2), other African countries and the U.S. (17.6% each), Ethiopia (14.3%), and Sudan (7.2%).

Degree of Readjustment and Predictor Variables

Values for the degree of readjustment variable ranged from 1.8 to 3.9, with a mean score of 2.8 and standard deviation of 0.5 (Table 5). Table 5 also shows the ranges, means, and standard deviation of the ten predictor variables. Returnees' ages covered a wide range, from 18 to 90; the average age of 52.1 indicates that this group is older than non-returnees. Household size also showed a great amount of variation from the respondents, from only one to fifteen. The number of languages spoken ranged from the respondent's language at birth only (usually Tigrigna or Tigre) to eight languages, most of which had been acquired in exile. Returnees spoke, on average, almost three languages. The range of years of education from 0 to 20 shows wide variation, from those with no training at all to those who had professional schooling.

Some returnees had not worked at all since coming home while others were employed full time; average status of employment was somewhat less than half a year. Income ranged from none to 5000 Nacfa per month. Returnees had lived away from Eritrea for as little as two years, and as long as 50 years. The average time in exile of 20 years corresponds to a generation. Some respondents made no contacts with their friends that did not affect their jobs or other personal matters; the maximum number of contacts per week was nine, with a mean of 3.7. Trips home during exile varied from none to

nine, with an average of 2.3; number of stops on the way back from a host country ranged from none to eight, with an average of 2.8.

Table 5 also shows correlations of the ten-predictor variables with degrees of readjustment. There is no significant correlation with age. There are weak negative correlations with time in exile and number of friendship contacts; that is, as expected, a longer time in exile is associated with poorer readjustment and, contrary to expectation, more friendship contacts is also associated with poorer readjustment. Larger household size is associated weakly with better adjustment. There are strong positive correlations with five predictor variables: better readjustment is associated with knowing more languages, more years of education, fuller employment, higher income, and more home visits; all these results are expected. Finally, more stops during the return journey were strongly associated with poorer readjustment.

To further our understanding of the types of variables that were the best predictors of degree of readjustment, the ten variables were placed in five groups:

- (1) Demographic (age, household size);
- (2) Socio-cultural (language, friendship contacts visits);
- (3) Economic (education, status of employment, income);
- (4) Temporal (time in exile); and
- (5) Spatial (number of stops).

Statistical analysis showed that the economic variables were the most important predictors of readjustment, followed by the spatial variables, the socio-cultural variables, the demographic variables, and the temporal variables.

Discussion

This paper seeks to enrich a small body of literature that examines the readjustment challenges faced by migrants who have left a developing country, in this case, Eritrea; lived in exile in countries around the world, and then returned to their home country. Eritrean migrants returned home voluntarily; and the manner of return was spontaneous. Soon after Eritrea's independence was announced, its citizens residing all over the world, particularly those who had left home because of fear of political persecution, and for economic betterment, were spontaneously returned home. The homeward move was emotional and rapid as the majority of returnees had no inkling of, and made no preparations for the exact date of return. It was therefore natural for most of them to go home quickly, irrespective of what they would encounter once they got there. Shortly after their arrival, however, some socioeconomic problems began to appear, which were natural in developing countries like Eritrea. Even during immigration, the same group of migrants faced a wide range of problems in Europe, U.S. and Middle East.

This paper considers the problems encountered by migrants both while living abroad and upon arrival back home, and differentiates these by host or exile country or region. Furthermore, it shows what kinds of personal characteristics are most important for a successful post-return adjustment.

The three most important kinds of readjustment challenges faced by the 600 returnees sampled were political, socio-cultural, and economic. There were clear differences between pre-return and post-return problems among the number who said these were the most important problems. When returnees were living abroad, they had the most trouble adapting to local social and cultural environments, followed by political

and economic problems. However, after their return home, economic problems came very much to the fore, followed by socio-cultural problems and almost negligible political problems. These overall results, however, differ by sex. Pre-return political challenges were slightly more important than socio-cultural problems for males, while for females socio-cultural problems predominated. Post-return, economic problems were most important for both sexes, but socio-cultural problems were more important for females. From a policy standpoint, the most important finding here is that government and non-government agencies which deal with returnees need to concentrate on the returnees' economic situation, in terms of providing such things as job opportunities and further training.

Again, the kinds of problems returnees faced abroad and back home varied greatly by country or region of exile. Those who went to Ethiopia experienced mainly political and socio-cultural problems there and economic problems when they came back. Migrants to Sudan had mainly socio-cultural and economic problems abroad, and economic problems upon return. Those who travelled to other African countries had mainly socio-cultural problems there, but socio-economic problems back home. Migrants to the Middle East experienced socio-cultural problems, and upon their return to Eritrea, faced economic as well as socio-cultural problems. Eritrean migrants to Europe had mainly socio-cultural problems both at home and abroad. Migrants to the U.S. had mainly socio-cultural problems abroad and a combination of socio-cultural and economic problems back home. Thus it is important for those dealing with returnees to take account of the places to which the migrants have been in developing reintegration

policies and programmes for them, because each of these places tends to produce a different mix of challenges.

Several personal characteristics of the returnees sampled are associated with how well they adjusted to their new life and new environments after they came back to Asmara. The six most important predictors of relatively good readjustment were fewer stops on the way home, more education, knowing more languages, higher monthly income, working a greater part of the year (status of employment), and more visits home while living abroad. It seems that those who made stops on the way home had greater trouble readjusting when they finally got there. Perhaps their goals were not as firmly fixed as those who came back more directly. Clearly, it benefits a returnee (for example, in looking for work or buying a house) to be better educated, be able to speak more languages, and earn more money, or work more hours. These are clearly personal attributes that need to be encouraged. Coming home more often perhaps enables returnees to establish contacts and pre-plan their return.

Somewhat surprisingly, those who made more friendship contacts had more difficulty readjusting, although the association was usually not strong. Perhaps, those who made more friendship contacts had more time on their hands because they were not working as many hours, and could more deliberately contemplate as well as reflect upon the changes in their circumstances. Larger household size had a weak association with better readjustment. The reason may be that larger families were better able to distribute tasks and thus cope better with new environments. It is interesting that neither age of returnee nor time in exile, when compared together, were significantly associated with degree of readjustment.

Conclusion

The results of this study of 600 household heads who returned to Asmara, Eritrea from around the world following independence, give us a good view of the problems they faced abroad and how well they readjusted after they came home. While they were in exile, socio-cultural problems were the most challenging; when they returned, economic problems came to predominate. Overall, those traveling to the most developed areas (Europe and United States) had mainly socio-cultural readjustment challenges but few economic or political problems away from home. When they got back, socio-cultural and economic problems were most important. For those travelling to less developed areas (Ethiopia, Sudan, other African countries, and the Middle East), Ethiopia stands out in posing pre-return political problems, while socio-cultural problems were most important in the other three areas. For all four developing host areas, economic challenges predominated on return home. The economic characteristics of returnees (education, status of employment, and income) were the most important set of predictors of successful readjustment. It has also been worthwhile to consider the impact of the intrinsic attributes of returnees, such as their spatial, demographic and socio-cultural attributes, on the degree of their readjustment challenges.

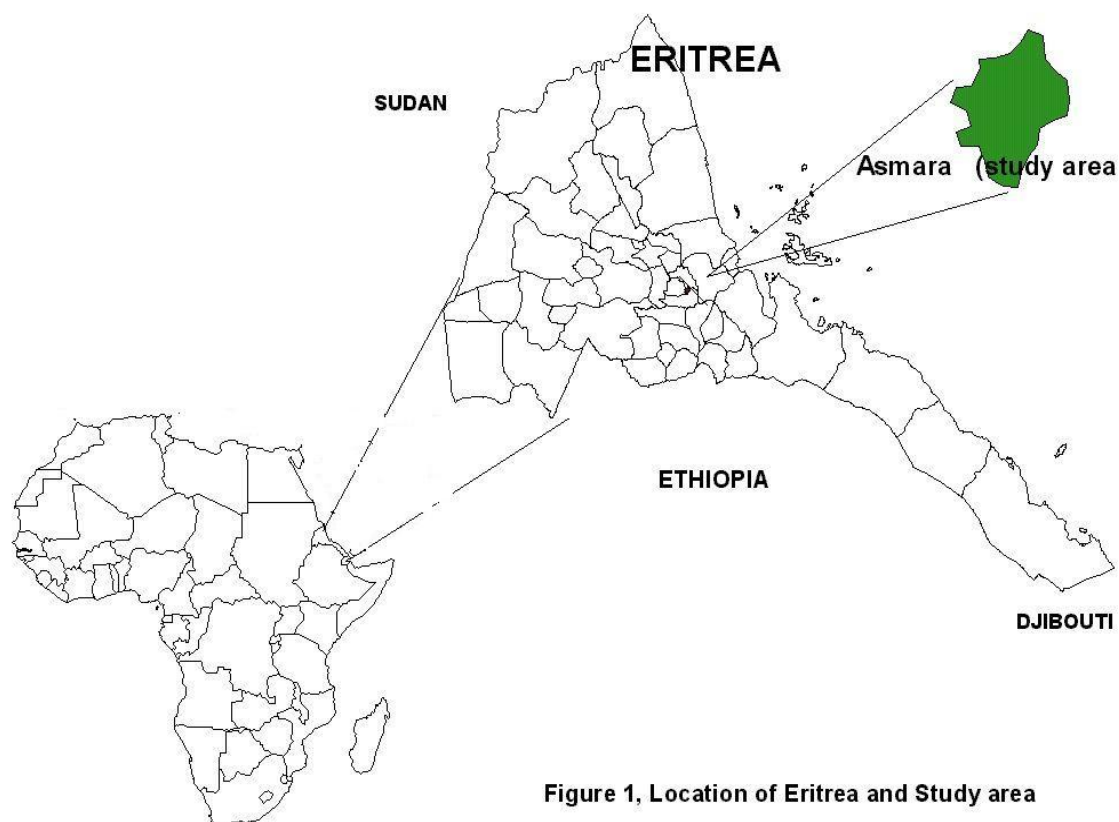


Figure 1, Location of Eritrea and Study area

TABLE 1

PRE-RETURN CHALLENGES of RETURNEES to ASMARA, ERITREA

Challenges	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Political	102	30.6	34	12.7	136	22.7
Socio-cultural	93	27.9	104	39.0	197	32.8
Economic	55	16.5	47	17.6	102	17.0
Health/aging/ Acclimatization	35	10.5	18	6.7	53	8.8
None	48	14.4	64	24.0	112	18.7
Total	333	99.9	267	100.0	600	100.0

TABLE 2**PRE-RETURN CHALLENGES by HOST COUNTRY by NUMBER by PERCENT**

Readjustment Problems	Ethiopia	Sudan	Other African Countries	Middle East	Europe	United States	Total
Political	34.2	11.1	11.8	8.8	9.1	11.8	22.7
Socio-cultural	27.7	34.4	35.3	49.1	36.4	47.1	32.8
Economic	14.7	23.9	11.8	12.3	18.2	5.9	17.0
Health/aging/ Acclimatization	8.4	7.8	5.9	8.8	13.6	17.6	8.7
None	15.0	22.7	35.2	21.0	22.7	17.6	18.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

TABLE 3**POST-RETURN CHALLENGES of RETURNEES to ASMARA, ERITREA**

Challenges	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Political	3	0.9	1	0.4	4	0.7
Socio-cultural	52	15.6	71	26.6	123	20.5
Economic	145	43.5	129	48.3	274	45.7
Health/aging/ Acclimatization	51	15.3	27	10.1	78	13.0
None	82	24.6	39	14.6	121	20.2
Total	333	99.9	267	100.0	600	100.0

TABLE 4

**POST-RETURN READJUSTMENT PROBLEMS by HOST COUNTRY by
PERCENT**

Readjustment Problems	Ethiopia	Sudan	Other African Countries	Middle East	Europe	United States	Total
Political	0.7	0.6	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.7
Socio-cultural	16.9	22.8	23.5	22.8	31.8	35.3	20.5
Economic	47.2	51.7	35.3	35.1	22.7	29.4	45.7
Health/aging/ Acclimatization	14.3	7.2	17.6	19.3	18.2	17.6	13.0
None	20.8	17.8	23.5	21.1	27.3	17.6	20.2
Total	99.9	100.1	99.9	100.1	100.0	100.1	100.1

TABLE 5

**DEGREE of READJUSTMENT and PREDICTOR VARIABLES: DESCRIPTIVE
STATISTICS**

Variable	No.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation To Readjustment	P-value
Degree of readjustment	600	1.8	3.9	2.8	0.5		
Age	600	18	90	52.1	12.0	-.021	.616
Household size	600	1	15	5.7	2.9	.146	.000
Language	600	1	8	2.9	1.4	.818	.000
Education	600	0	20	5.9	5.5	.826	.000
Status of employment	600	0	12	5.6	5.0	.755	.000
Monthly income	600	0	5000	1018.8	1103.8	.812	.000
Time in exile	600	2	50	20.7	9.2	-.094	.022
Friendship contacts	600	0	9	3.7	2.8	-.155	.000
Home visits	600	0	9	2.3	2.3	.721	.000
Number of stops	600	0	8	2.8	2.3	-.845	.000

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