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An examination of the relationship between social self-efficacy and personal growth initiative in international context[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The cross-cultural transitioning experience of international students has been viewed as a high-impact practice for student learning. International students experience both challenges and growth opportunities when they encounter new peoples and environments. However, limited research exists on the student factors that predict benefits, growth or resilience for international students through their cross-cultural transitioning experience. This study investigated social self-efficacy as a predictor of personal growth initiative amongst international students, above and beyond demographic and linguistic factors. In addition, the factorial structure of Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II was examined. Our results indicated that the perceived ability to successfully negotiate social situations and produce positive social interactions predict greater personal growth initiative and its dimensions regardless of students' language proficiency. Moreover, results from the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provided further support for the first-order four-factor structure of the PGIS-II. Results have implications for improving international student integration, because efforts to support students' social self-efficacy are linked to their personal growth initiative.

Introduction

International education has the potential to present students with high-impact learning and growth opportunities. However, international students who study beyond the borders of their home country encounter growth opportunities as well as challenges. Numerous studies have revealed the potential benefits of dealing with demanding life challenges (e.g., [Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004](#)). Those who move to and live in places very different than from their native environments inevitably encounter challenging experiences that require major life adjustments. One example is international students, who seek a cross-cultural transitioning experience and undergo major life adjustments, which can be challenging as well as enriching.

The vast majority of studies on the impacts of the international education and the cross-cultural transitioning experience of international students tend to focus on stress and coping or cross-cultural adaptability (e.g., [Williams, 2005](#)), and adopts a pathological view of international students and their experiences in comparison to the experiences of their domestic peers ([Lillyman & Bennett, 2014](#); [Moore & Popadiuk, 2011](#)). Such a skewed view has resulted in a negative depiction of international students and their experiences and ignores their growth initiative and resilience. By contrast, far fewer studies have explored international students' experiences beyond the challenges of cross-cultural adaptability and integration, and those studies have revealed that international students successfully navigate difficulties in their new environment and utilize those difficult experiences as

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sources of personal growth (e.g., Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

However, the impact of cross-cultural transitioning experiences might differ for students, depending on their social self-efficacy and their motivation to pursue personal growth. Thus, the present study aims to balance the negatively skewed perspective of international students by exploring the neglected positive aspects of their experiences with a focus on social self-efficacy and personal growth initiative (PGI).

Many theories recognize that continued personal growth throughout the life span is an indicator of healthy functioning (e.g., Robitschek, 1998). Individuals with high PGI are found to successfully manage stressors and challenges throughout their lives, report better adjustment to the environment (Yakunina, Weigold, & Weigold, 2013), have high levels of well-being (Robitschek & Keyes, 2009), and experience fewer psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (Robitschek & Kashubeck, 1999). PGI also plays an important role in international students' cross-cultural transition process. For example, high levels of PGI and multicultural strength are predictors of fewer acculturation problems, and they lead to better adjustment to a new country (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013).

Given the fact that PGI is viewed as an indicator of positive functioning, healthy personality, and greater adjustment, investigating predictors of PGI could provide promising benefits by targeting ways to boost PGI. One construct proposed as relevant to PGI is self-efficacy, because PGI has been posited to reflect the cognitive components of self-efficacy "including beliefs, attitudes and values that support personal growth" (Robitschek, 1998, p. 184). Like PGI, self-efficacy has also been related to cross-cultural adjustment (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Existing research studies have shown a link between generalized self-efficacy and PGI (e.g., Ogunyemi & Mabekoje, 2007; Sharma & Rani, 2013; Weigold et al., 2014). More specifically, self-efficacy was a predictor of PGI in a sample of graduate students in India (Sharma & Rani, 2013) and in a sample of university students in Nigeria (Ogunyemi & Mabekoje, 2007). A notable gap in these studies, however, was the inconsistent strength of the relations found between self-efficacy and PGI, which ranged from small to large. In addition, these studies reporting self-efficacy as a predictor of PGI either utilized the older version of the scale used to assess PGI or lack evidence of the validity of the factorial structure of the recently redesigned Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II).

PGI is conceived of as a multidimensional construct with distinct cognitive and behavioral dimensions. The original instrument developed to assess PGI was a one-dimensional nine-item scale, and the use of the original measure was limited in assessing the multiple components (cognitive and behavioral) of the construct and fully capturing the complex growth process. Thus, a multi-dimensional instrument (PGIS-II) with cognitive and behavioral components was reconstructed to overcome the limitations of the initial measure (PGIS-II, Robitschek et al., 2012). In the development study, three factorial structures for the new instrument (single factor, first-order four-factor, and second-order four-factor) were examined. The results revealed the first-order four-factorial structure as the best fitting model, supporting the existence of two cognitive (*readiness for change* and *planfulness*) and two behavioral (*using resources* and *intentional behavior*) dimensions that compose PGI (Robitschek et al., 2012).

Prior empirical research utilized the redesigned instrument evaluated PGI as a total score obtained through averaging the scores of each factor (e.g., Sharma & Rani, 2013; Thoen & Robitschek, 2013; Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac et al., 2013), as recommended by Robitschek et al., 2012. However, considering the established first-order four-factor structure of the instrument, evidence lacking to support the use of a general PGI score being greater than its four dimensions (Freitas, Damásio, Tobo, Kamei, & Koller, 2016). A study conducted in a sample of international students also suggested the utilization of the first-order solution when evaluating PGI (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold et al., 2013), prompting the researchers to call for further research to validate the factorial structure of the instrument, specifically among samples of international group of peoples. Moreover, the unstable factorial structure revealed with the cross-cultural use of the scale (e.g., Bhattacharya & Mehrotra, 2014 in India), and the addition of error covariances among the scale items to obtain an adequate fit (e.g., Freitas, Damásio, Kamei, Tobo, Koller, Robitschek, 2017; Weigold et al., 2014; Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold et al., 2013) necessitated further evaluation of the instrument.

In light of calls by researchers in the field to further examine the structure of the PGIS-II (e.g., Freitas et al., 2016; Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold et al., 2013), we examined the proposed multidimensional factorial structure of the instrument, and explored the plausibility of the second-order factorial structure of PGIS-II to use an overall PGI in evaluating the construct.

Moreover, given that many of the difficulties associated with international student's cross-cultural adjustment are related to changes in social norms and cultural background, we argue that social self-efficacy (more so than generalized self-efficacy) would play an important role in the adjustment process. Thus, this study explored whether social self-efficacy predicts PGI, above and beyond demographic and linguistic factors, in a sample of international students.

Literature review

Personal growth initiative

The urge for personal growth and enhancement throughout life can be considered one of the universal human motivation or needs. *Personal growth initiative* (PGI) represents an active and intentional engagement in the process of enhancing and developing one's self across multiple life domains (Robitschek et al., 2012). Personal growth can occur in one of three different ways: developmental, environmental, and intentional. While growth resulting from developmental and environmental factors occurs without the intention or awareness of the individual, growth resulting from intentional processes requires one to be fully aware of, and committed to, the cognitive and behavioral aspects of changing one's self (Robitschek, 1998). The salient aspect of the construct of PGI, which differs from other conceptualizations of the term "personal growth" in the literature, is the *intentionality* with which one engages the self-change process. In support of this difference, intentional engagement in the growth process has been found to be positively

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