A transformative taste of home: Home culture primes foster expatriates' adjustment through bolstering relational security ☆

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ABSTRACT

Past research encourages expatriates to immerse themselves in the host culture, avoiding reminders of their home culture. We counter that, for expatriates still struggling to adjust, home culture stimuli might prime a sense of relational security, emboldening them to reach out to locals and hence boost cultural adjustment. In Study 1, American exchange students in Hong Kong felt more adjusted to Hong Kong after incidental exposure to iconic American practices (vs. Chinese or neutral), an effect partially mediated by relational security and not by other exchange student concerns. Study 2 surveyed exchange students from Hong Kong at three points in time: before, during and after a study abroad term. The intervention of writing about home culture (vs. host culture) symbols during their trip helped adjustment for those with pre-trip insecurities about interacting with locals but not those lacking these insecurities. The boost in adjustment from the home culture primes had a lasting impact, visible in the post-trip evaluations of the study abroad experience by students in the initially insecure group.

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From Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* to Pixar's *Ratatouille*, plots pivot and characters change after a taste of home—foods can evoke a flood of memories, thoughts and feelings that embolden an alienated person to reach out to others. The current research investigates this possibility with regard to expatriates, many of who suffer feelings of insecurity and alienation toward their host culture (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Could food or other stimuli associated with the home culture help the adjustment of exchange students and other fledgling expatriates? Past cultural researchers have maintained that acculturation requires immersion and even unlearning of home-culture associations (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p.337–339). But this advice may overlook the emotional dynamics of expatriate adjustment. If home culture reminders (primes) alleviate feelings of insecurity and alienation, then a taste of home might empower a struggling expatriate, emboldening them to reach out and ultimately engage more deeply with the host culture.

Research focus on expatriate emotions has declined over time. Classic depictions of adjustment to a new culture highlighted the role of emotions (Adler, 1975; Church, 1982). Expats begin with an excited honeymoon phase and then enter the phase of "culture shock," the "anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols" (Oberg, 1960, p.177), before eventually arriving to a more settled phase of engagement with the local culture. Adler (1975) described culture shock as a downward spiral of insecurity about interacting with locals, defensive withdrawal, and crippling alienation. Although "culture shock" remains a popular term, rigorous tests revealed that not all expats experience these phases or do so in this order (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Luk, & Shaffer, 2005). Research on expatriate emotions focused instead on stress as a byproduct of negative acculturation interactions (Berry, 1997).

Much recent research centers on expatriate adjustment, defined as "psychological comfort with various aspects of a new setting" (p. 298, Black & Gregersen, 1991). Research on managers and students abroad finds that adjustment decreases with cultural distance between home and host countries (Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004), but increases with greater cross-cultural training, organizational support and family adjustment (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989; see Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007 for a review) and with personality traits such as extraversion and tolerance for ambiguity (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004). While this correlational evidence suggests ways to select and support expats, it provides little insight into the psychological processes through which expats transition from insecurity and alienation to comfort and engagement.

The current research brings new conceptual and methodological tools to understand expatriate insecurity and adjustment, drawing on

the cultural psychology and attachment theory. Culture priming research finds that exposure to symbols of one's home culture triggers associated memories, feelings and concepts (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Attachment research finds that anxiety toward outgroups is reduced by primes of one's close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Putting these ideas together, we reach the counterintuitive conclusion that expats' adjustment to the host culture could be helped by primes of the home culture.

Icons and security

Iconic cultural images and artifacts have been called "magnets of meaning" because they are potent triggers of thoughts and feelings (Hong et al., 2000). Exposure to icons of one's native culture evoke related schemas, feelings and memories, calling up this cultural content to the fore of one's mind (Fu, Chiu, Morris, & Young, 2007; Fu, Morris, Lee, Chao, Chiu and Hong, 2007). For Sino-Anglo bicultural individuals, exposure to Chinese versus Western icons draws out their Chinese versus Western habits of self-construal (interdependent vs. independent) (Ng & Lai, 2009; Sui, Zhu, & Chiu, 2007), subjective well-being (relationship-based vs. self-focus) (Tam, Lau, & Jiang, 2012) and emotional experience (Perunovic, Heller, & Rafaeli, 2007). Verkuyten and Pouliasi (2006) ound similar cultural priming effects on Greek–Dutch biculturals' perception on themselves and their significant others. To summarize, primes of home activate memories and representations of close relationships. Hence we predict that expats exposed to home culture primes would experience a sense of connectedness and relational security.

Attachment research links relational security with behavior toward outgroups. Mikulincer and Shaver (2001, 2007) primed relational security in Israeli students (by exposing them to attachment figures or associated words) and observed reduced prejudice toward minority groups, such as Arab Israelis. Likewise, they found dispositional secure attachment style to be associated with lower prejudice levels than insecure attachment style. This suggests that feelings and thoughts of relational security allay the anxiety of intergroup interaction, just as a secure relational base empowers a toddler to explore (Bowlby, 1969). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) argued that attachment bases vary depending on contexts. Relationships to romantic partners, leaders or even groups may serve as secure bases in different life situations.

Many expats move from an environment with secure relationships, affiliations, and social routines to a foreign setting where they have few or no connections, and where making connections seems difficult. Lacking familiar bases of support, they can feel insecure and anxious, which impede their ability to connect with locals. If home culture primes allay this crippling insecurity by restoring their sense of social connectedness, this should help their host culture adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Consistent with this idea, Hong, Fang, Yang, and Phua (2013) found that Indonesians studying in Singapore with higher levels of implicit home-culture attachment reported higher level of adjustment to the *host* culture. To summarize, we propose that home culture primes could provide sense of relational security and boost adjustment in the host culture.

Pilot study: apple pie vs. mango pudding

A pilot study was conducted as a preliminary test of the key prediction that exposing fledgling expatriates to home culture primes would heighten their sense of relational security.[1] Twenty-seven American exchange students (age: $M = 21.93$, $SD = 3.65$; 48.1% male) recently arrived in Hong Kong ($M = 2.82$ months, $SD = 1.03$) participated in this study. They were told that the session comprised two separate studies. In an ostensible "marketing study," they were presented either

[1] Full procedures, materials and results are presented in online supplementary materials.

a tray of American desserts (apple pie, cheese cake, and carrot cake) or Chinese desserts (mango pudding, sesame dumplings, and red bean pastry). These desserts were chosen based on nominations as favorite desserts when abroad by US and Hong Kong students in pretests. Participants tasted the three desserts, evaluated them and chose their favorite. Participants were then led to a different cubicle for a 'survey study.' Participants rated themselves on several scales related to exchange student experience, including feelings of relational security (e.g. 'I am very comfortable being close to Hong Kong people'). *T*-test results showed that relational security was higher after tasting American desserts ($M = 4.48$, $SE = .22$) than Chinese desserts ($M = 3.85$, $SE = .24$) at a marginally significant level, $t(25) = 1.94$, $p = .06$, CI [$-.04$, 1.30]. This pilot experiment showed preliminary support to our proposal that home culture primes have a distinct effect on exchange students' feeling of relational security.

Current research

We hypothesized that home culture primes would allay expatriates' insecurities and thereby foster adjustment to the host country. We tested this proposal in two experimental studies with American and Chinese exchange students. In Study 1, American students undergoing exchange programs in Hong Kong participated in the research. We examined the effects of exposure to iconic cultural practices (home, host or neutral) on cultural adjustment and tested relational security against other possible mediators. Study 2 studied exchange students from Hong Kong who studied abroad in a variety of other countries. It tested whether student with initial insecurities about interacting with locals benefited from exposure to home culture (versus host culture) primes in terms of their resulting feelings of cultural adjustment and their longer term meaningful engagement in the study abroad experience.

Apart from our proposed mechanism of relational security, we also tested for other plausible alternative mechanisms. An effect of home culture primes could run through reduced negative affect, such as depressive feeling (Seale & Ward, 1990). Alternatively, home culture primes may remind exchange students of their learning orientation for their foreign stay — pushing them to reach out to host locals (Palthe, 2004) or remind them that they are representing their country, cuing obligations to act as ambassadors (Chiu, C. Y., personal communication). These alternatives are plausible, but we expect that the effect of home culture primes will run through mechanism of allaying relational insecurity.

Study 1: baseball vs. tai chi

Design

We propose that home culture primes evoke the feeling of relational security and for fledgling expats making a challenging cultural adjustment, this would heighten their sense of cultural adjustment. Study 1 formally tested the following specific hypotheses. First, home culture primes would increase expats' relational security. Second, home culture primes would increase expats' perceived cultural adjustment. Third, the effect of home culture primes on cultural adjustment would be mediated by their relational security. We exposed participants to sentences of varying cultural significance (home, host or neutral) and then measured their responses to the possible mediators (relational security, international harmony, personal growth, and depression) and cultural adjustment.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 87 US exchange students (Age: $M = 21.5$, $SD = 2.77$; 49.4% male; 44.8% Caucasian, 35.6%