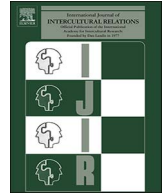




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Intercultural engagement and relatedness: Examining mediation effects



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ABSTRACT

Most research on student sojourners has studied students coming from the Majority World to Western countries, especially the United States, for undergraduate and graduate education. Though increasing greatly in numbers, shorter sojourn has not been the focus of attention. With regard to the adjustment of sojourners, research has tended to stress situational factors rather than personality. This study is different in terms of focusing on short term educational sojourn of Western students in a Majority World country and examining the effect of personal characteristics and cultural evaluation of the sojourners on their experience. Relatedness and country of origin were found to influence the cultural experience of exchange students through their cultural evaluation at baseline. Students with higher relatedness orientation had more positive cultural evaluations at baseline which then led to a more positive cultural experience in the receiving country.

Introduction

Globalization over the last decades has become visible in many different spheres of human mobility. A marked manifestation is found in international education, particularly at the tertiary level. In 2005 more than a million students and scholars were estimated to be involved in institutions of higher education abroad (Taylor, 2005); by 2012 this estimation had reached 4.1 million (OECD, 2012). Such global intercultural experience of youth is of great significance and has been studied in sojourn (temporary stay abroad) research from various viewpoints and disciplinary perspectives. In many cases features of the international experience, cultural adaptation, stress and other outcomes of sojourn are examined.

Kagitcibasi (1978), who conducted one of the earliest studies on student sojourners, noted that only some 80 studies had been published by 1978. More recently the interest in the topic and the studies carried out have increased dramatically, as international educational mobility has been expanding globally. Studies have pointed to the potentially strong effects of international student experience, some finding it even to have transformative power (Brown & Brown, 2009).

The countries where sojourners go show diversity. From the start, the most important receiving countries have been English-speaking USA, UK, Australia and Canada, followed by Western European countries. These economically developed countries are still receiving the greatest numbers of students (OECD, 2009). But, more recently the number and scope of the receiving countries have been increasing, extending to the Majority World (e.g. Mustafa & Ilias, 2013). There are several reasons for this development, including special bilateral or other cooperation schemes among countries (Denman, 2001), developments in technology and transportation (Kondakci, van den Broeck, & Yildirim, 2008), increasing demand for higher education (Li & Bray, 2007), and decreasing attractiveness of the traditional receiving countries, especially the USA, due to high expenses and perceived prejudice and

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discrimination there (Lee & Rice, 2007). Also there appears to be an increasing interest in going to more diverse cultures, especially for short term educational sojourn.

Nevertheless not much research has been conducted on Western student sojourners to non-Western countries (Sam, Tetteh, & Amponsah, 2015; Swagler & Jome, 2005). The present study is novel in this respect. It studies Western short term student sojourners in a non-Western country, Turkey. Another important aspect of this study, to be described below, concerns a focus on person – dependent variables, that is, country of origin and related self construal, rather than environmental or situational variables, as predictors of satisfaction with the sojourn and evaluation of the receiving culture. This perspective has also not been used often in research on educational sojourn.

Short term educational exchange

Most research examining the factors influencing international educational experience of graduate and undergraduate students has studied longer duration sojourn (Pallos, Gergely, Yamada, Miyazaki, & Okawa, 2005; Sakamoto, 2006; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). However shorter international programs have also been expanding. In fact, it has been noted that although more students are studying abroad, they are doing so for shorter periods of time (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Pitts, 2009). Students participate in these short term programs for a year, a semester, or a summer, most frequently to get an intercultural experience, to learn a language or to get some specific certificate. There are even shorter term educational visits, usually lasting eight weeks or less, some being faculty-led study abroad programs (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Spencer & Tuma, 2008). Some short term study programs are included within the regular curriculum of fields such as social work (e.g. Mapp, 2012).

As noted by some researchers (Carley & Tudor, 2006; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), the relatively more recent phenomenon of short term international education has not been studied extensively, though studies on European Erasmus programs and American exchange programs have been conducted (e.g. Anderson et al., 2006; Engle & Engle, 2004). It is important to study this type of sojourn both in its own right and also to find out if similar causal processes are functioning here as in longer term sojourn experience. For example, in short term sojourn the lesser overall commitment and investment in terms of time and finances may render the whole experience qualitatively different from longer term sojourn. Similarly, short term sojourners' initial attitudes might go through less modification than those of longer term sojourners given the former's more limited experience in the receiving country. Short term student sojourners may experience more general acceptance in the receiving society and institution as "guests", in line with the common hospitality norm, and possibly face less discrimination. Given their lower level of commitment, short term student sojourners may start their sojourn with mostly positive initial attitudes, which might help create more positive experiences (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). On the other hand, sojourners tend to have high expectations of their cultural experience, and there can be gaps between these expectations and the limitations of the short sojourn experience (Pitts, 2009). Such discrepancies would create challenges to adjustment. Thus, to develop a better understanding of such questions and others, there is as much need for research on short term educational exchanges as long term ones.

Adjustment and personal characteristics

The main topics of study in the area of international student mobility are student adjustment to the receiving society, defined as the psychosocial process of achieving harmony with the host environment by Hsiao-Ying (1995), and the quality of the student sojourner's cultural experience and success. More specific outcome variables include attitudes toward receiving society, extent and frequency of communications with receiving society persons and friendships formed, academic performance, psychological distress vs. well-being, and the like. A cursory glance at relevant research points to the great diversity of causal factors that have been studied, which eschews simple categorization. Nonetheless, we can at least differentiate general orientations focusing on contextual factors (such as receiving country characteristics, level of acceptance by the receiving society, norms and stereotypes, etc.), background factors of the sojourners (such as country of origin, 'cultural distance', race, ethnicity, etc.), personality or individual characteristics (such as flexibility, openness, independence, attitudes, expectations, etc.), communication capabilities (such as language proficiency), and situational factors (such as the length of stay in the receiving country, degree of contact with receiving country nationals, etc.). In most cases studies focus on a number of factors in combination, in line with the complexity of the phenomenon. In general personal/individual characteristics have been studied less than the other factors and used to a lesser extent as causal variables. This is understandable because of the perceived greater applied significance of the other factors. For example studies examining situational factors point to policy implications of their findings such as improving institutional resources to support international students.

Nevertheless, more recently there has been an increased awareness of the importance of personal factors (Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002; Swagler & Jome, 2005). Individual differences in personality and aspects of self have been found to impact adjustment to the new environment. For example, Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) found external locus of control, loneliness and weak co-national identification to predict poor adjustment and global mood disturbance among a multi-national sample of foreigners resident in Nepal. Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) showed that student sojourners with more independent selves experienced higher self-esteem, fewer psychosocial difficulties and better psychological adjustment in a multi-national group of international students from collectivistic countries studying in Canada. Vansteenkiste, Lens, Soenens, and Luyckx (2006), working with Chinese student sojourners in Belgium, found the satisfaction of their autonomy, relatedness and competence needs to be related to psychological well-being, vitality and (negatively) depression. Galchenko and Van de Vijver (2007) and Suanet and van de Vijver (2009) showed that personality factors together with other factors such as perceived cultural distance have strong associations with outcome factors among exchange students in Russia. Kim and Goldstein (2005) found that American students' intercultural attitudes predict favourable study

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