



The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Culture
Foreign experiences
Multicultural experiences
Living abroad
Breadth of living abroad
Depth of living abroad
Identity
Self-concept clarity
Career decision-making

ABSTRACT

The current research explores the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity. We conducted six studies ($N = 1,874$) using different populations (online panels and MBA students), mixed methods (correlational and experimental), and complementary measures of self-concept clarity (self-report and self-other congruence through 360-degree ratings). Our results indicate that living abroad leads to a clearer sense of self because it prompts self-discerning reflections on whether parts of their identity truly define who they are or merely reflect their cultural upbringing. Furthermore, it is the depth (the length of time lived abroad) rather than the breadth (the number of foreign countries lived in) of living abroad experiences that enhances self-concept clarity. Finally, our results highlight an important consequence of the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity: career decision-making clarity. Our research suggests that going far from home can lead one closer to the self, with implications for significant life decisions.

1. Introduction

“Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am... Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines... you are forced into direct experience [which] inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience.”

Michael Crichton, *Travels*

Foreign experiences are increasingly common in the globalized world of the 21st century. Companies need to work across national borders and recruit foreign talent in order to stay competitive (“Competing Across Borders”, 2012); educational institutions are admitting foreign students and opening campuses in different parts of the world in unprecedented numbers (Marklein, 2013; Schuetze, 2013); and interpersonal relationships are cutting across national boundaries more than ever before (Charsley, 2013). As the journalist Thomas Friedman famously noted, the world is becoming increasingly “flat” (Friedman, 2005).

Research is only starting to document the psychological ramifications of these foreign experiences. For instance, studies have shown that foreign experiences enhance creativity (Godart, Maddux, Shipilov, & Galinsky, 2015; Leung & Chiu, 2010; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Lu,

Martin, Usova, & Galinsky, in press; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009), reduce intergroup bias (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan, & Wang, 2012), and promote career success (Maddux, Bivolaru, Hafenbrack, Tadmor, & Galinsky, 2014; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Yet, many important questions remain unanswered. In particular, it is still unclear whether and how foreign experiences have an enduring effect on a person’s sense of self. Although we know that foreign experiences can lead individuals to incorporate multiple cultural identities into the contents of their self-concept (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Saad, Damien, Benet-Martínez, Moons, & Robins, 2013), we know less about how these experiences affect the overarching structure of their self-concept. Thus, despite Michael Crichton’s assertion that going abroad may elucidate our notions of who we are, research has yet to investigate the empirical foundations of this claim.

To address this question, we tested the idea that living abroad changes a key structural aspect of the self: self-concept clarity. This construct refers to the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept are “clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). Investigating the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity makes a number of contributions of both theoretical and practical value.

First, the current research enhances our understanding of the

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consequences of living abroad. Although there is an increasing interest in studying how living abroad influences people's sense of self, research so far has only explored the impact of foreign experiences on the *contents* of the self-concept—i.e., the person's specific cultural identities (e.g., Chirkov, 2009; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ward, 2001). The present work is the first to investigate how foreign experiences can also change the *structure* of the self-concept. Furthermore, whereas the bulk of research on foreign experiences has focused on whether participants have lived abroad or not, we take a more nuanced approach that distinguishes between the depth and the breadth of these experiences (see also Cao, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2014; Godart et al., 2015; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017).

Pursuing this research question also enriches our understanding of the nature of the self-concept. Structural aspects of the self, such as self-concept clarity, have been conceptualized as relatively stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996; Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010). However, if self-concept clarity is indeed affected by personal experiences like living abroad, this finding would align with recent studies suggesting that the structure of people's self-concepts is flexible (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Moreover, these recent studies have found that transitional experiences, such as job changes or romantic breakups, typically *decrease* self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter et al., 2010). In contrast, we examine the provocative possibility that living abroad is a rare kind of transitional experience that may actually *increase* self-concept clarity.

Understanding the impact of living abroad on self-concept clarity also has important applied implications. Because self-concept clarity has been linked to numerous positive outcomes, including psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), the ability to cope with stress (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011), and job performance (Earl & Bright, 2007), understanding if living abroad can lead to a clearer sense of self has direct practical value. Furthermore, we measure self-concept clarity not only through self-reports, but also through self-other agreement using a 360-degree rating system. These multi-rater systems have become highly prevalent in the corporate world, with some estimates indicating that around 90% of large organizations use them (ETS, 2012). Importantly, research has shown that poor self-other rating agreement can lead to a range of negative job-related outcomes (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009). It is therefore critical to identify potential factors—such as living abroad—that can lead to higher levels of congruence between self-ratings and other-ratings. Finally, our research explores an important consequence of the enhanced self-concept clarity that individuals gain from living abroad—career decision-making clarity, which has become a central topic in vocational psychology (e.g., Blustein, 2008; Santos, Ferreira, & Gonçalves, 2014).

2. Self-concept change: content versus structure

The self-concept has long been conceptualized as a complex cognitive structure that is fluid, malleable, and dynamic, as it can experience both short-term, temporary change as well as long-term, lasting transformations (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). The latter type of change especially has received sustained research attention for several decades. Scholars across a variety of sub-disciplines in psychology and organizational behavior have examined how people's sense of who they are can undergo major revisions. Adult development researchers, for instance, investigate crucial periods of transition, such as the transition from youth to adulthood (Arnett, 2001; Bynner, 2005; Molgat, 2007) or the transition to parenthood (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012). As another example, a large body of research examines the changes in the self-concept that follow trauma such as illness, accidents, or bereavement; these studies largely focus on whether such negative events can lead to positive changes in one's sense of self, a phenomenon referred to as post-traumatic growth (Neimeyer, 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Finally, organizational researchers are interested in the self-concept changes

that accompany career transitions, from entering into a new role, to receiving a promotion, changing careers, being laid off, or retiring (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999; Strauss, 1977; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

A key distinction in research on the self-concept is that between its *contents* (i.e., self-representations) and its *structure* (i.e., the way these self-representations are organized and a person's meta-perceptions about this organization) (Campbell et al., 1996; McConnell & Strain, 2007). Studies on self-concept change, such as those reviewed above, tend to focus on changes in the contents of the self-concept rather than its overall structure. In other words, most studies have examined changes in specific components of the self-concept such as losing an identity (e.g., bereavement, job loss), adding a new identity (e.g., marriage, parenthood), or changing the contents of a specific identity (e.g., career change, immigration). Consequently, although this research provides a robust understanding of how the various elements of the self-concept can change, it cannot explain whether and how overall structural characteristics of the self-concept—such as self-concept clarity—can also change.

3. Living abroad and self-concept change

One stream of research on self-concept change is the work on the consequences of living abroad. Many scholars have converged on the idea that “hitting the road has substantial effects on who we are” (Zimmerman & Neyer, 2013, p. 527). Understanding how multicultural experiences affect changes in the self-concept has been recognized as essential to understanding the experiences of expatriates (Kohonen, 2004; Osland, 2000), biculturals (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), immigrants (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fuligni & Tsai, 2015), and students enrolled in study abroad programs (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Elwood, 2011; Zimmerman & Neyer, 2013).

Just like studies on self-concept change in general, however, studies that specifically look at the effects of living abroad on the self-concept have focused on changes to the contents rather than the structure of the self. In particular, if people go abroad, they may add self-representations such as “adventurous”, “global cosmopolitan”, or “culturally savvy” to their repertoire. The acculturation literature in particular has illuminated how expatriates manage the challenge of forging a new sense of self as they navigate the differences in norms, values, and beliefs between the home and host cultures (Chirkov, 2009; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney, 2003; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Ward, 2001). This work has focused on whether individuals hold on to their home culture identity, to their host culture identity, to neither, or to both (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Berry, 1997; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Thus, this literature has been primarily concerned with the contents of the self-concept, probing which self-representations a person maintains, adds, or drops when living abroad (e.g., “I live in China, but I really feel like an American”, or “I feel like both an American and a Chinese”).

Although an increasing amount of research has shed light on how living abroad changes the contents of the self-concept, we propose that living abroad may also change the *structure* of the self-concept. We focus on one such key structural aspect: self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-concept clarity is associated with a host of positive outcomes: It contributes to psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), psychological adjustment (Campbell, Assanand, & Paula, 2003), relationship satisfaction (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010), life satisfaction (Mittal, 2015), purpose in life (Błażek & Besta, 2012), adaptation to stress (Lee-Flynn et al., 2011), cooperative problem-solving in conflict situations (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Zapf, 2010; De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005), and job performance (Earl & Bright, 2007). Given the numerous benefits of self-concept clarity, it is all the more valuable to understand whether and how it can be cultivated.

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