



# When in Rome: Intercultural learning and implications for training<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Learning requires acquiring and using knowledge. How do individuals acquire knowledge of another culture? How do they use this knowledge in order to operate proficiently in a new cultural setting? What kinds of training would foster intercultural learning? These questions have been addressed in many literatures of applied and basic research, featuring disparate concepts, methods and measures. In this paper, we review the insights from these different literatures. We note parallels among findings of survey research on immigrants, expatriate managers, and exchange students. We also draw on experiment-based research on learning to propose the cognitive processes involved in intercultural learning. In the first section, we focus on acquiring cultural knowledge, reviewing longstanding literatures on immigrant acculturation and expatriate adjustment investigating antecedents of intercultural adjustment and performance. In the second section, we focus on displaying proficiency, examining how newcomers to a cultural setting deploy their knowledge of it in order to adjust their behavior and judgments. We draw upon findings about individual differences and situational conditions that predict performance to suggest training for optimal use of cultural knowledge by adapting behaviors and judgments according to situational factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Whereas scholars once thought that globalization would dilute cultural differences and reduce the challenges they pose to organizations, in practice it brings managers into contact with more cultures than ever before, heightening the need for intercultural competence and learning. Firms that once manufactured solely in their home country and exported to just a few familiar neighboring countries now manufacture and sell globally, requiring managers to deal with new and unfamiliar cultures. Consider for instance the classic British firm Land Rover: today it belongs to Tata Motors of India, sells more in China and Russia than any European country, and manufactures in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, managers in public sector organizations – whether military, medical, or environmental in their missions – increasingly find themselves working on global problems that bring them to remote countries with unfamiliar cultures (e.g. Yemen, the Congo, Siberia). Globalization has increased the world's connectedness and pace of change, meaning that more and more managers have to gain proficiency in new cultures in order to succeed.

Globalization has also contributed to intercultural challenges at home. Workplaces are more culturally diverse as a result of increased immigration (Portes, 1995), multiculturalist policies and ideologies (Modood, 2013; Shweder, Minow, & Markus, 2004), and the post-Cold-War resurgence of ethnic identification (Barber, 2004; Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). Whereas the US workforce once consisted predominantly of White males, this category no longer constitutes a majority (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Even managers of local enterprises need to learn about cultural differences in order to communicate and connect with diverse employees.

Finally globalization has also increased the cultural diversity within individuals. More and more people reside in multiple countries over the course of their lives and careers, becoming bicultural or multicultural (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Harris Bond, 2008). Resultantly, people's passport, birthplace, and residence are increasingly limited as guides to the person's behaviors, preferences, or expectations. This makes it all the more challenging to rely on knowledge of people's cultural background when interacting with them. Efforts to take into account another person's culture risks making them feel stereotyped (Leung & Su, 2004).

### 1.1. Augustine's advice

Intercultural interactions and careers are hardly new, but contemporary managers may face more complex intercultural challenges. The classic adage – “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” – originated with an executive's intercultural dilemma. Augustine, a native of Carthage serving as Bishop of Milan, wrote to Januarius, Bishop of Naples, with advice about an upcoming trip to their organization's headquarters in Rome. At the time, Christians in Rome fasted on Saturday whereas Christians in other cities did not. To avoid scandal or offense, Augustine's approach was to fast when in Rome but not when at home in Milan, and he advised Januarius to adapt to local norms in the same way. History does not record whether the advice was followed, but we do know that Augustine had a long successful career after this correspondence, whereas Januarius was martyred not long thereafter.

Although Augustine found adaptation to be an easy solution to his intercultural dilemma, contemporary managers in many contexts find it fraught with challenges. Consider first the challenge of learning the foreign cultural

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