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Brief report

U.S. college students' lay theories of culture shock



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ABSTRACT

As researchers strive to identify the components of effective preparation for study abroad, it is also critical to investigate the beliefs and expectations about intercultural adjustment that students bring to these interventions. A questionnaire assessed the structure and correlates of 149 U.S. undergraduate students' lay theories of culture shock. Findings indicated that students tended to attribute culture shock to differences in the external environment, such as language, communication, and surroundings, rather than to internal affective or cognitive factors, such as poor stress management, identity confusion, or prejudice. The tendency to attribute culture shock to internal causes was greater for those with higher levels of cultural competence, whereas low travel experience and interest in foreign language learning predicted the tendency to attribute culture shock to external causes. These results are discussed in terms of implications for sojourner adjustment and intercultural training.

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1. Introduction

Recent research indicates that the benefits of study abroad are significantly enhanced by students' participation in intercultural training programs (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, & Hoff, 2005; Deardorff, 2008; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). As institutions of higher education seek to develop and implement intercultural training for study abroad students, research must not only focus on the components of effective programs, but on the beliefs and expectations about the intercultural adjustment process that students bring to these interventions.

Understanding students' beliefs about the intercultural adjustment process is of particular importance given the role that expectation–experience congruence plays in sojourner satisfaction, with studies indicating greater satisfaction when expectations are met or overmet (Black & Gregersen, 1990; Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Bürgi, 2001; Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Templer, Tay, & Chandrasekar, 2006). Embarking on a study abroad program with a set of inaccurate beliefs seems likely due to the fact that the vast majority of U.S. students receive no formal pre-departure orientation (Berdan, Goodman, & Taylor, 2013) and such training, when it does exist, ranges widely from semester-long classes to brief seminars, podcasts, online documents, or student handbooks. Unless students are exposed to high quality intercultural interventions or informal intercultural mentoring (for example, by study abroad returnees), their inaccurate beliefs about the intercultural adjustment process may never be challenged, since these beliefs appear to be fairly stable throughout students' college careers (Goldstein & Kim, 2006).

The current study explores a specific aspect of students' beliefs about intercultural adjustment: lay theories of culture shock. Despite the substantial benefits of study abroad, student sojourners frequently face significant difficulties in

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transitioning to the host culture, particularly at the initial stages of the sojourn (Brown & Holloway, 2008), often limiting their social and academic success (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). These difficulties are commonly referred to as “culture shock.” Pedersen (1995, p. 1) defines culture shock as “the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment” and notes that the term has been used to describe the emotional, psychological, behavioral, cognitive, and physiological impact of the adjustment process on the individual.

Several theories have been proposed to explain why culture shock occurs and how it might best be alleviated. In the most comprehensive effort to date, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham's (2001) A B C Model classifies major theoretical approaches to sojourner adjustment in terms of the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of the process, which they view as complementary and interacting. The stress and coping literature characterizes the affective component of culture shock, in that culture contact is viewed as one of many stressful life events subject to cognitive appraisal. The behavioral component of culture shock is perhaps best represented by the culture learning approach, which is an extension of social skills theories. The basic assumption of this approach is that sojourners face difficulties in adjustment because they lack culturally relevant skills and knowledge, such as those dealing with interpersonal communication and social relationships. The cognitive component of culture shock focuses on social identification theories, which encompass a broad range of approaches addressing the psychological processes involved in both self-perception, such as social identity development, and the perception of others, such as the intergroup relations processes of prejudice and stereotyping. Although the theoretical perspectives of intercultural scholars may be categorized in terms of affective, behavioral, and cognitive components, there have been no studies to our knowledge that explore the extent to which undergraduate students share these explanations for culture shock.

Culture shock is widely recognized and discussed among college undergraduates (Furnham, 2004), indicating the presence of lay theories. Furnham, Daoud, and Swami (2009, p. 464) defined lay theories as the . . . “informal, common-sense explanations that individuals provide for particular social behaviours or phenomena and that often differ markedly from academic (that is, expert) theories of the same phenomena.” Our research has been modeled after the methodology developed by Furnham and colleagues in their extensive investigations of the structure and correlates of lay theories on a wide variety of topics (see, for example, Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Furnham & Chan, 2004; Furnham & Anthony, 2010; Furnham, 2013).

Given the exploratory nature of this study, no formal hypotheses were developed regarding the content, structure, or correlates of the lay theories. We expected that the content of lay theories would depend upon one's knowledge of cultural and intercultural phenomena. Individual difference variables may be associated with motivation to seek such knowledge (Deardorff, 2006; Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014). In view of the absence of research on lay theories of culture shock, we identified potential correlates by relying upon predictors of intercultural adjustment, a process highly dependent on cultural knowledge seeking (Earley & Ang, 2003), and selected self-efficacy, openness to experience, ethnocentrism, foreign language interest, and cross-cultural competence as individual difference variables of interest.

1.1. *Self-efficacy*

Bandura (1977, p. 193) defined self-efficacy as “the conviction one can engage in behavior that will produce the desired outcome.” Numerous studies indicate that self-efficacy is associated with successful intercultural adjustment (e.g., Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996; Li & Gasser, 2005; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013), and culture learning (MacNab & Worthley, 2012) and that it increases as a result of intercultural experience (Milstein, 2005). Thus, we expected that self-efficacy would play a role in shaping lay theories of culture shock.

1.2. *Openness to experience*

Of the Five Factor Model dimensions (McCrae & Costa, 1987), openness to experience is most often identified as an important intercultural trait (in contrast to extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness; Leung et al., 2014). Openness to experience predicts positive relationships with members of the host culture (Caligiuri, 2000), correlates with cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007) and is associated with a decreased tendency to view intercultural situations as threatening (Van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013). We expected that openness to experience would be closely related to the information seeking which informs and shapes lay theories of culture shock.

1.3. *Ethnocentrism*

Neuliep and McCroskey (1997, p. 385) identified ethnocentrism as “one of the central concepts in understanding outgroup attitudes and intergroup relations. . .” In one of the earliest definitions, Sumner (1906, p. 13) described ethnocentrism as the “. . . view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” Ethnocentrism is associated with misperceptions about the behavior of culturally different individuals (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997), the tendency to “. . . intentionally circumvent communication with persons of different cultures” (, p. 203), and distinguished individuals who chose to study abroad from those who did not (Goldstein & Kim, 2006). We expected that lay theories of culture shock would be influenced by the diminished culture learning that accompanies ethnocentrism.

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