Predicting adjustment of U.S. college students studying abroad: Beyond the multicultural personality

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal path analysis tested Yakunina et al.’s (2012) partially mediated model of the relationship between the five multicultural personality factors (MPQ) measured at Time 1 and psychological adjustment measured at Time 2 in 120 U.S. students studying in Costa Rica for a semester. With the addition of other individual and social variables, this model also was tested as a predictor of students’ sociocultural adjustment. Individual (multicultural personality traits, openness to diversity, study abroad goals, language proficiency), social (homestay experience, amount of contact with co-nationals, amount of contact with locals), and structural factors (participation in structured group programs) were considered. Results for psychological adjustment mostly supported Yakunina et al.’s findings except for the relationship between openness to diversity and adjustment, raising the question of whether level of openness to diversity itself changes over the course of the study abroad experience. For sociocultural adjustment, a partially mediated model was the best fit, with social interaction with locals serving as a mediator of students’ MPQ level of open-mindedness and the quality of the homestay experience. Level of language ability at Time 1 was a direct predictor of this type of adjustment. Thus, the two types of adjustment have different predictors, with language proficiency and social interactions with locals being most important for sociocultural adjustment. Implications of the results for study abroad programs and future research are discussed.

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1. Predicting sociocultural and psychological adjustment of U.S. college students studying abroad

Intercultural experiences have become more important as our societies become increasingly global and interconnected. One indicator of the importance of such experiences is the growing number of U.S. students choosing to study abroad (Redden, 2013). The potential benefits of such experiences are significant: broadening of one’s world-view, greater cultural sensitivity, increased creativity and complex thinking, the development of new neural networks, and better career outcomes (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Fischer, 2013; Kitsantas, 2004; Maddux, Bivolaru, Hafenbrack, Tadmor & Galinsky, 2014; Redden, 2016). In order to maximize the benefits of study abroad, it is important that students successfully adjust to their host culture. The current study examined what personal, social, and structural factors predicted good adjustment in three cohorts of U.S. students studying at a host university in Costa Rica. We tested and expanded upon Yakunina

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et al.’s (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2012) model of the relationship between the multicultural personality and psychological adjustment to determine if it could be replicated in a different sample using a longitudinal rather than a cross-sectional design. We also examined whether this model could predict sociocultural adjustment or whether it would need to be enhanced by including measures of students’ goals/expectations for the experience, language proficiency, homestay experience, interactions with host and co-nationals, and membership in a structured group.

The literature on adjustment distinguishes between psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Swagler & Jome, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Psychological adjustment, which refers to feelings of well-being, is generally assessed in terms of life satisfaction, positive and negative mood states, depression, and/or anxiety. Sociocultural adjustment is defined as the ability to “fit in” with the host culture, and typically is measured by how much difficulty a student has with various aspects of living in a different culture. Although inter-related, the two types of adjustment demonstrate different patterns of development. In the beginning of a sojourn, newcomers may experience anxiety and stress about their new environments and culture, but these worries decrease over time as the individual makes friends and develops effective coping strategies. Pre-existing personality attributes, however, may make this process somewhat variable. Thus, psychological adjustment generally shows a pattern of gradual improvement over time with considerable individual variability (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). For sociocultural adjustment, newcomers typically start off at low levels and rapidly improve over the first few months during which they acquire a range of competencies, after which their level of adjustment levels off (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward et al., 1998). Furthermore, the two types of adjustment are relatively uncorrelated at the beginning of a cross-cultural transition, but become significantly correlated by the end of the first year as increased cultural skills decrease psychological stress, at least in some contexts (Ward et al., 1998). The current study examined both types of adjustment.

The most frequently studied variables relating psychological adjustment to the study abroad experience are personality traits, especially the NEO Big Five factors of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (Swagler & Jome, 2005; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004; Zhang, Mandl & Wang, 2010). Most studies find that positive psychological adjustment is best predicted by high levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion, and low levels of neuroticism. Using a measure of personality traits conceptually related to the Big Five but specifically adapted to assess the “multicultural personality,” Yakunina et al. (2012) found that the psychological adjustment of international students studying in the U.S. was best predicted by a partially mediated model: direct effects of emotional stability (ES, similar to low neuroticism), social initiative (SI, similar to extraversion), and cultural empathy (CE, similar to agreeableness) as well as indirect effects of cultural empathy, flexibility (FI, similar to conscientiousness), and open-mindedness (OM, similar to openness to experience). The latter three personality subscales had their effects mediated by openness to diversity, another individual difference variable. Thus, the students who had the best psychological adjustment had higher levels of emotional stability, social initiative, cultural empathy, and openness to diversity. Although Yakunina et al.’s (2012) partially mediated model significantly predicted psychological adjustment in their sample of international students in the U.S., all measurements were made at one point in time. The predictive nature of the model would be better tested in a longitudinal design, with the five multicultural personality traits and openness to diversity assessed at the beginning of a study abroad experience and adjustment assessed at the end. That was one purpose of the current study. Because we were interested in how pre-existing and stable personality traits at Time 1 predicted psychological adjustment at Time 2, we only measured the latter at Time 2. Another purpose of the study was to validate the partially mediated model found by Yakunina et al. in a different sample: U.S. students studying abroad rather than international students (mostly from Asia) studying in the U.S.

A third focus of the current study was to determine how multicultural personality traits contributed to sociocultural adjustment. Given the differences between the two types of adjustment, it seems likely that somewhat different personality traits would be predictive. Previous research using measures of the NEO Big Five factors (Swagler & Jome, 2005; Ward et al., 2004) indicates that positive sociocultural adjustment is best predicted by high openness and extraversion scores and low neuroticism scores. In terms of the multicultural personality factors, this suggests that the factors of OM, SI, and ES would be significant predictors. Leong (2007) examined this question longitudinally in a sample of Singaporean students studying abroad and found that SI was the most important scale in predicting sociocultural adjustment. Openness to diversity is also likely to be predictive but whether it serves as a mediating variable as in Yakunina et al.’s (2012) research needed to be determined.

Since the best sociocultural adjustment involves immersion in the host culture while maintaining connection to one’s heritage culture, i.e., an integration strategy (Berry, 1997; Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer, & Lee, 2011; Swagler & Jome, 2005; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012), it seems likely that social and structural factors would be helpful to students studying abroad in addition to the personal variables of personality traits, openness to diversity, goals/expectations of the study abroad experience, and language proficiency. Also important should be social variables related to students’ homestay experience, connections with co-nationals and local culture, and connections with friends/family at home; and structural variables, such as being part of a structured group experience. Although many studies have examined individual variables, the current study included all three types to determine the best predictors of sociocultural adjustment.

Goals and expectations should be important predictors of students’ adjustment to their study abroad experience. Gaps between expectations and experience should cause discouragement and stress, as well as uncertainty about goal achievement (Pitts, 2009). Personal growth and a desire to expand one’s knowledge and understanding are frequently-cited goals for study abroad (Mikal & Grace, 2012; Ryan & Twibell, 2000). International students who scored high in planfulness (considered to maximize their experience and gain the skills and knowledge they desired) had better psychological adjustment.
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