



Transformation abroad: Sojourning and the perceived enhancement of self-efficacy

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Abstract

This paper empirically examines communication self-efficacy as a possible profound payoff of sojourning. A review of relevant literature explores the interrelationships of communication, sojourning, and personal growth. Questionnaire data from an international sample of 212 Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) alumni are used to test hypotheses about the sojourn and perceived changes in communication self-efficacy. Data analysis revealed that 95.5% of the sample retrospectively reported a perceived increase in self-efficacy. In addition, positive correlations were found between self-reported challenge of sojourn and reported perceived change in self-efficacy, and between self-reported success of sojourn and perceived communication self-efficacy scores. Discussion addresses these findings as well as study limitations, possible future research directions, and implications for practice.

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1. Introduction

Speak to people about their time abroad and often their eyes will light up. Many who have sojourned describe their experiences as profoundly meaningful, often

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crediting them with changing them at fundamental levels.¹ Some sojourners describe a transformation in their very sense of self, both in how they experience their own cultures and in how they view their life paths. Some speak of an increased sense of empowerment, an enriched sense of belief in their own capabilities. The current study focuses on this seemingly common sense of transformation, and explores whether this perceived sense of growth can be empirically measured by specifically looking at sojourners' beliefs about their communication self-efficacy.

Past studies of sojourners tended to emphasize sojourners' psychological well-being in encountering unfamiliar environmental demands within the host culture. These studies tended to look at the sojourn from a problem-oriented vantage, often focusing on whether sojourners' effectiveness overseas and their ability to deal with culture shock could be predicted before the sojourn (Kim, 1987, 2001). Some researchers criticized what they saw as an "exclusive emphasis on the negative aspects of geographic movement" (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 42), and urged researchers to begin to look at positive and growth aspects of the sojourn.

Adler (1975, 1987) argued that, while culture shock was most often associated with negative outcomes, researchers should also look at how culture shock is often important for self-development and personal growth. Adler (1987) explained the sojourn in terms of a transitional process that moves an individual from a state of low self and cultural awareness to a state of higher self and cultural awareness and described culture shock as "an experience in self-understanding and change" (p. 29). Furnham and Bochner (1986) further examined this growth-oriented vantage, stating, "The implication is that although it may be strange and possibly difficult, sojourning makes a person more adaptable, flexible, and insightful" (p. 47).

Kim and Ruben (1988) integrated the intercultural adaptation-as-problem approach and the intercultural adaptation-as-learning/growth approach with their theory of intercultural transformation. Kim (2001) clarified that all experiences of cross-cultural adaptation are both problematic and growth producing. "Despite, or rather because of, the difficulties crossing cultures entails, people do and must change some of their old ways so as to carry out their daily activities and achieve improved quality of life in the new environment" (p. 21). The present study continues this trend in sojourner research, proceeding with the assumption that the reality of sojourner adaptation is truly the relative, dialectical integration of problem and growth.

Models and theories about growth possibilities of the sojourn are central to the intercultural discussion. In recent years, more empirical studies on the sojourn have begun to look at its impact on individuals (Cushner & Karim, 2004). Many of these newer studies look at positive outcomes, such as creation of a global worldview (Bachner, Zeuschel, & Shannon, 1993); attitude change (Sell, 1983); enhanced awareness and understanding of oneself (Kauffmann et al., 1992); higher levels of international concern and cross-cultural interest, as well as more positive, though more critical, attitudes toward one's home country (Carlson & Widaman, 1988); and

¹A sojourn, as defined here, involves individuals living within a location and culture different from their own for a period of 6 months to 5 years with the intention to return home (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

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