



Culture shock and reverse culture shock: The moderating role of cultural intelligence in international students' adaptation



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ABSTRACT

This study extends previous research by examining the role of cultural intelligence (CQ) in both culture shock and reverse culture shock. Specifically, this study asserts that CQ acts as a moderating mechanism that lessens the negative effects of both culture shock and reverse culture shock on psychological and sociocultural adaptation among international students. Two studies were conducted in Australia to test these assertions. Study 1 ($n = 189$) was participated in by new international students. An online survey was set up and disseminated. Results indicated that culture shock is significantly but negatively related to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. In addition, results demonstrated that CQ moderates the relationship by lessening the impact of culture shock on students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Study 2 ($n = 123$) was participated in by international students who had recently graduated and returned to their home countries. An online survey was also set up and disseminated. Results indicated that reverse culture shock is significantly but negatively related to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. CQ also served as a moderator in lessening the impact of reverse culture shock on both forms of adaptation.

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1. Introduction

International students have been the focus of many cross-cultural studies (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) given the continuing rise of internationalization and globalization in the higher education sector (Seeber, Cattaneo, Huisman, & Paleari, 2016). In Australia, for example, the higher education sector received more than 400,000 international students in 2012 from 190 countries (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013) which is viewed to have contributed significantly to the country's cultural diversity (Tan & Liu, 2014).

While there are desirable outcomes to having international students, research has shown that international students more often than not struggle with culture shock as they move to and live in a new country (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Culture shock has been viewed as the process of initially adjusting to a new cultural environment (Pedersen, 1995). Culture shock has an impact on several outcomes, one of which is adaptation. Research has shown that culture shock can either minimize or prolong the adaptation period of an individual in his or her new cultural environment (e.g., Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), depending on the emotional, psychological and/or physical stresses and difficulties associated with culture shock (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). However, it is not clear in the literature how intercultural capabilities can mitigate culture shock to bring about faster adaptation and adjustment. This study aims

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to address the gap in the literature by looking specifically at how cultural intelligence (CQ), as an intercultural capability, can assist individuals in managing culture shock and bring about faster adaptation. This study also aims to explore the role of CQ in the relationship between reverse culture shock and adaptation. Reverse culture shock has been defined as somewhat similar to culture shock although the focus is on the stresses and challenges associated with moving back to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment (Gaw, 2000). Similar to culture shock, reverse culture shock can be argued to have an impact on an individual's adjustment and adaptation. However, to date, very little is known about the relationship between the two. Specifically, there is an absence of research that looks into the role of CQ in the reverse culture shock–adaptation relationship.

This study aims to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, this study addresses the gap in the literature by demonstrating the role of CQ as an intercultural capability that moderates the relationship between culture shock and two forms of adaptation: (a) psychological, and (b) sociocultural. To date, one study has been found (i.e., Chen, Lin, & Sawangpattanakul, 2011) that investigated the relationship between CQ and culture shock. However, this study focused on CQ as a predictor that influenced culture shock (as a mediator) and performance (as an outcome). Second, this study extends the previous research by investigating not only culture shock but also reverse culture shock. Previous studies have looked into these two forms of culture shock in isolation (e.g., Chen et al., 2011; Goldstein & Keller, 2015). This is the first study that examines both forms of culture shock and relates them to CQ and psychological/sociocultural adaptation. Third and last, this study contributes to the vast literature on international students by asserting that CQ is not only relevant to new international students' adaptation but also to the adaptation and adjustment of recent graduates who have returned to their home countries. Investigating reverse culture shock is a critical aspect of international overseas study but is often neglected in the literature. This study puts reverse culture shock in the spotlight as a phenomenon that should also be given attention, particularly in the domain of higher education.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the theoretical background of the paper and is followed by the development of hypotheses. The methods and data used in the study were then discussed followed by the results of the data analysis. The last section of the paper includes a discussion of the implications of the paper, both theoretical and practical, and provides opportunities for further research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Culture shock, reverse culture shock and adaptation

Culture shock has been defined as the “process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment” (Pedersen, 1995). Several theories and models have been formulated to explain why individuals experience culture shock. One of the most comprehensive models explaining culture shock is the ABC model developed by Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001). The ABC model explains major theoretical approaches to sojourner's adjustment and focuses on affective, behavioral and cognitive processes. The affective process of culture shock is viewed to be rooted from the stresses associated with moving to an unknown and unfamiliar location. The behavioral process, on the other hand, focuses on the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new cultural environment when there is a lack of culturally-relevant skill sets. Lastly, cognitive process focuses on psychological mechanisms involving both self-perception (i.e., social identity development) and other-perception (i.e., intergroup relations processes).

Culture shock has been studied in the context of higher education particularly among international students (e.g., Furnham, 2004). One of the impacts of culture shock is on international students' adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008). Berry (1997, p. 13) referred to adaptation as “changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands”. Adaptation is viewed in the literature to have dimensions (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016) comprised of psychological and sociocultural aspects. The psychological aspect consists of a sense of identity, mental health and overall life satisfaction, while the sociocultural aspect consists of an ability to cope with daily stresses at school, work and society in general (Ward, 1996; Ward & Searle, 1991). Adaptation that is positive is considered to be instrumental and leads to successful sojourns, while negative adaptation can lead to unsuccessful sojourns (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Brisset et al., 2010; Chiu, Wu, Zhuang, & Hsu, 2009). If an international student experiences culture shock, the likelihood of achieving a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is lower. Similarly, the likelihood of coping with the daily stresses at school, home and society at large are also lower.

Reverse culture shock has also emerged in the cross-cultural literature. Reverse culture shock is defined as somewhat similar to culture shock, however, the focus is on the difficulties and challenges of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or live in another cultural context (Gaw, 2000). Some research has referred to reverse culture shock as “re-entry” shock. For example, Steyn and Grant (2007) investigated the re-entry experiences and the re-adjustment of apartheid-era political exiles upon their return to a more liberated and free South Africa. In the context of international students, a recent study demonstrated the presence of reverse culture shock among students returning from a six-month overseas educational program (Dettweiler et al., 2015).

Like culture shock, reverse culture shock can also be argued to relate to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. When an individual or a group experiences high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of establishing a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is low. Similarly, when an individual or a group experiences high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of coping with the day-to-day stresses of social life is low. In other words, adaptation (both

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