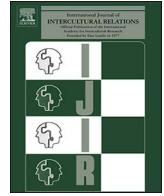


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Self-determined motivation for studying abroad predicts lower culture shock and greater well-being among international students: The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad programs are becoming increasingly popular, yet leaving home to live in a foreign country can be very stressful. We tested the idea that self-determined motivation to study abroad can prevent students from experiencing culture shock and support their subjective well-being, using a sample of 131 international students studying in the United States. After controlling for demographic variables, personality traits, length of stay in the United States, and external difficulties (e.g., language), self-determined study abroad motivation was associated with lower culture shock and greater contextual subjective well-being. Furthermore, basic psychological needs satisfaction fully mediated these relationships. The present study shows that international students' motivation influences their acculturation, by helping them to meet their own needs in the new context. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as study limitations, are discussed.

Introduction

Studying abroad, especially in the case of foreign students coming to the United States (U.S.), has become increasingly popular in recent decades. In the 2015–2016 academic year, over 300,000 new international students enrolled in American higher education (Institute of International Education, 2016). Of course, such intercultural experiences can bring many benefits, such as cultural learning and personal growth through cross-cultural adjustment (Adler, 1975). However they can also bring great challenges for international students, as they leave their familiar world behind, and try to adjust to a new physical, cultural, and linguistic location (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Due to difficulties in communication, lack of social support, and unsettling cultural differences, foreign students sometimes report a profound sense of isolation (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994), intense feelings of depression (Ying & Liese, 1991), and plummeting levels of subjective well-being (i.e., lower satisfaction, lower positive affect and also higher negative affect) (Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, & Lynch, 2007). Moreover, some international students even suffer from the experience of “culture shock”. Oberg (1960, p. 177) first described culture shock as “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse”. Recent literature described culture shock as maladaptive psychological reactions and mental disorders that occur in response to the transition from one cultural setting to another (Harvey & Park, 2012). Research has demonstrated that the experience of culture shock also negatively impacts international students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Presbitero,

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2016). Given these potential negative consequences, it seems imperative to discover factors that can protect international students from culture shock and unhappiness.

Despite limited research showing that motivational factors play a significant role in predicting psychological and sociocultural adaptation (e.g., [Gezentsvey & Ward, 2008](#)), motivational factors still have been seriously neglected in studies of cross-cultural adjustment. Two studies have taken the perspective of self-determination theory (SDT) to examine the relationship between international students' self-determined motivation and their subjective well-being ([Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman, & Playford, 2008](#); [Chirkov et al., 2007](#)). These studies found that international students indeed vary in their level of self-determined motivation for coming to the U.S. ([Chirkov et al., 2007](#)), and further revealed that self-determined motivation is correlated with greater psychological well-being, higher objective social-cultural adjustment (e.g., language preference), and fewer general psychosomatic symptoms ([Chirkov et al., 2008](#)). However, neither study tested whether self-determined motivation could mitigate against international students' experiences of culture shock, as specifically operationalized in terms of maladaptive psychological reactions to an unfamiliar cultural environment. In addition, neither [Chirkov et al. \(2007, 2008\)](#) study examined the underlying mechanisms through which adaptive motivation mitigates against culture shock and supports well-being. Finally, neither study examined and controlled for alternative predictors of culture shock and well-being, such as personality traits, length of stay in the host country, and external difficulties in communication. Our study sought to address these gaps in the literature, while also providing new avenues for designing interventions to help international students.

Self-determined motivation for studying abroad

According to SDT ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2017](#)), all behaviors vary with respect to their degree of felt autonomy or self-determination, differences which are associated with different functional outcomes. Specifically, SDT proposes that all behaviors can be located on a continuum ranging from feeling completely controlled and non-self-determined, to feeling fully autonomous and self-determining ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). Self-determined (autonomous) motivation is characterized by an internal perceived locus of causality, in which the person feels he or she causes himself or herself to act ([Ryan & Connell, 1989](#)). Self-determined behavior typically feels congruent with one's own will and preferences, reflecting intrinsic interests and personally endorsed values ([Sheldon, Osin, Gordeeva, Suchkov, & Sychev, 2017](#)). On the other hand, non-self-determined (controlled) motivation is characterized by an external perceived locus of causality, in which the person feels forced to act. Such behavior typically feels controlled by external contingencies (e.g., material rewards) or by internal pressure (e.g., guilt) ([Ryan & Deci, 2000b](#)).

Especially when applying SDT within cultural research, it is necessary to differentiate the concept of autonomy from the concept of individualism. Individualism refers to cultural practices and types where priority is given to the individual's needs, goals, and preferences, rather than to the group's needs, goals and preferences (i.e., collectivistic practices and types). SDT claims that autonomy can exist in either type of culture, and that, properly understood, autonomy is not equivalent to individualism; nor is autonomy equivalent to other self-centered concepts like pleasure, selfishness, ego-involvement, callousness, or materialism. Instead, autonomy involves the experience of being self-regulating, rather than of being controlled by others or by circumstances.

It is true that the experience of self-determination might somewhat vary in different cultural settings (e.g., [Ginevra et al., 2015](#)). Also, people in individualistic cultures typically feel more autonomous and self-regulating ([Chirkov et al., 2008](#)), on average, than people in collectivistic cultures ([Church et al., 2013](#)). However, SDT posits that autonomy reflects a universal propensity of human beings to try to be the masters of their own actions, regardless of their culture ([Chirkov, 2007](#)). Numerous cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that self-determined motivation occurs in both collectivistic and individualistic cultural settings ([Chirkov, 2007](#)), and is universally beneficial for individuals' well-being and optimal functioning in varied domains ([Sheldon, Cheng, & Hilpert, 2011](#)).

For instance, self-determined motivation for studying a second language negatively predicted American students' anxiety, but positively predicted their intention to continue studying ([Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000](#)). Similarly, studies on Chinese learners demonstrated that, when they were driven by self-determined (vs. controlled) academic motivation, they showed more adaptive learning attitudes, higher academic performance, and greater personal well-being ([Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005](#)). In addition, self-determined motivation is positively correlated with Canadian swimmers' persistence ([Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001](#)), and Greek adolescents athletes' better coping strategies and daily effort ([Mouratidis & Michou, 2011](#)). Cross-cultural research has found that self-determined motivation positively predicted psychological well-being across four types of cultural environments (horizontal individualism and collectivism, and vertical individualism and collectivism), sampled in six different countries ([Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003](#); [Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness, 2005](#)).

In the current study, using a comprehensive and widely applicable measure of self-determined motivation ([Sheldon et al., 2017](#)), we intended to examine how self-determined motivation for studying abroad relates to international students' culture shock as well as their subjective well-being. Based on the literature reviewed above, our first hypothesis was that self-determined motivation for studying abroad would be positively associated with international students' subjective well-being, and would be negatively associated with culture shock.

Self-determined motivation, basic psychological needs satisfaction, and acculturation

What is the underlying mechanism that accounts for the expected relationship between self-determined motivation and international students' positive acculturation? SDT proposes that human beings have three innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that serve as experiential nutrients for growth and optimal functioning ([Ryan & Deci, 2017](#)). Specifically, autonomy involves feelings of volition and self-authorship, rather than feelings of being forced to act. Competence involves

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