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The role of core self-evaluation, ethnocentrism, and cultural intelligence in study abroad success

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ABSTRACT

The increases in globalization and growth of multi-national corporations have spawned attention to the role of international experiences in management education. We develop and test a framework to understand individual and motivational factors that may contribute to subjective indicators of study abroad program success. Specifically, we propose motivational cultural intelligence mediates the relationship of both core self-evaluation and ethnocentrism to successful study-abroad experiences. Data were collected from 183 college-level business students who had recently completed study abroad experiences. Mediation analysis results showed motivational cultural intelligence partially mediated the relationship between core-self-evaluation, and ethnocentrism, and subjective success of study abroad experiences (enjoyment, personal growth, general success). Implications for improving study abroad experiences are discussed.

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Globalization brings with it an increase in demand for globally-minded leaders. Universities have responded to this demand by expanding international experiences such as study abroad programs. The operating assumption of such programs is international exposure will pay dividends to students and their future potential employers by broadening their perspectives and cultural competencies (Gabrielsson & Kirpalani, 2004). In the U.S., students have responded in record numbers as participation in study abroad experiences has seen double-digit annual increases since 1996 (Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004). For instance, by 1999 about 130,000 students participated in study abroad programs compared to just 62,000 a decade earlier. This is particularly noteworthy for business students, who represented about 21% of all study abroad students in 2008. Participation in study abroad programs grew 10% worldwide, from 2006 to 2008, suggesting an international consensus that study abroad experiences are a valuable component of higher education. With such an uptick in participation and availability of study abroad programs, it is imperative to examine factors that predict successful global educational experiences. In this study, we investigated subjective indicators of success, which we define here as students' perceptions of personal growth, enjoyment and general success in their study abroad programs.

To understand how to more effectively meet the goals of study abroad programs, researchers have examined topics such as recruitment, duration and program support systems surrounding these programs. To our knowledge, however, the role of individual differences and motivational factors in participants' subjective success in study abroad experiences has received

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little attention. Such individual differences extend beyond dispositional constructs and may also include culturally-relevant values and motivational orientations that could impact the subjective benefits that students gain from study abroad experiences. Without testing such individual differences— faculty and administrators who oversee such study abroad programs may not know how such differences may impact the outcomes. If such differences do play a role, then prescreening and anticipatory socialization efforts for study abroad programs may help facilitate successful student experiences, which in turn will contribute to future program success. For instance, study abroad program administrators could help students be better prepared if they know in advance the individual attributes that may be associated with setbacks during study abroad experiences. Student personal characteristics are therefore a much needed focus of research and are central to this study.

The concept of “global mindset” has been described as geo-centrism where decision-making must embrace the global environment in the context of strategic management. Global mindset has been articulated as consisting of global business acumen (recognizing opportunities in international ventures) and cultural intelligence (one’s readiness to acknowledge, obey, practice, and embrace new cultures) (Story & Barbuto, 2011). For this investigation of study abroad experiences we focused on cultural intelligence—specifically the motivational component of cultural intelligence, rather than global business acumen. Our presumption is that although undergraduate students generally may lack a substantial experience base that contributes to the development of global business acumen, they may to varying degrees display a motivational mindset that helps them develop such acumen. To our knowledge, no studies have tested the role that motivational cultural intelligence plays in study abroad experiences.

We also investigated the role of two key individual differences on both motivational cultural intelligence and study abroad success: core self-evaluation, and ethnocentrism. We selected core self-evaluation as a broad-based personality factor comprised of self-efficacy, internal locus of control, emotional stability and self-esteem (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Ethnocentrism is an individual preference for one’s native culture expressed as discomfort with novel and ambiguous settings (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). The field has lacked empirical work on how cultural intelligence impacts study abroad participants, beyond just aggregated and programmatic outcomes (Wilkinson, 1998). Extensive work has been done in the organizational behavior and human resources fields – with examination of international job assignments and global leadership roles with inclusion of orientation, frequency of visits, duration of assignments, variety of cultures visited, languages spoken, and scope of assignments (Story, Barbuto, Luthans, & Bovaird, 2014). Because study abroad experiences are educational in nature, they represent a different context than expatriate work experiences. Testing the proposed framework helps us ascertain the potential roles that key individual differences and cultural intelligence may play in determining the subjective quality of study abroad experiences.

Fig. 1 displays our theoretical framework. We posit that personal characteristics including core self-evaluation and ethnocentrism respectively will positively and negatively predict students’ motivational cultural intelligence, which in turn will predict their perceptions of study abroad success.

1. Core self-evaluation, ethnocentrism, and successful study abroad experiences

Research has examined a variety of outcomes of study abroad experiences such as the benefits of language learning (Freed, 1995), improvements in reading, listening and speaking skills (Willis, Doble, Sankarayya, & Smithers, 1977), and competence in intercultural communication (Penington & Wildermuth, 2005). Antecedents to such outcomes have focused on program characteristics (e.g., lived with host family, participated in extra curricula experiences), and characteristics of participating students (e.g., politeness, cohort social patterns, languages) (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006).

In this study, we test study abroad success as an affective outcome from the students’ perspective. We define study abroad success as the extent that students view their study abroad experience as enjoyable, contributing to their personal and career growth, and successful.

At the individual level, a variety of personality traits have been identified as contributors to effective study abroad experiences including self-confidence and personal control (Robinson, Stimpson, Huefner, & Hunt, 1991), tolerance toward new

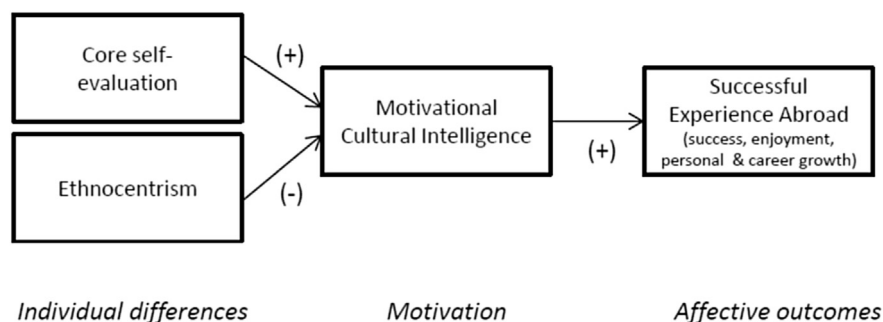


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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