

Transnational Marriage: New Perspectives From Europe And Beyond

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The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity

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ABSTRACT

The current research explores the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity. We conducted six studies ($N = 1,474$) using different populations (online panels and MBA students), mixed methods (correlational and experimental), and complementary measures of self-concept clarity (self-report and self-other congruence through 360-degree ratings). Our results indicate that living abroad leads to a clearer sense of self because it prompts self-discerning reflections on whether parts of their identity truly define who they are or merely reflect their cultural upbringing. Furthermore, it is the depth (the length of time lived abroad) rather than the breadth (the number of foreign countries lived in) of living abroad experiences that enhances self-concept clarity. Finally, our results highlight an important consequence of the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity: career decision-making clarity. Our research suggests that going far from home can lead one closer to the self, with implications for significant life decisions.

1. Introduction

"Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am... Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines... you are forced into direct experience [which] inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience."

Michael Crichton, *Travels*

Foreign experiences are increasingly common in the globalized world of the 21st century. Companies need to work across national borders and recruit foreign talent in order to stay competitive (Compiling Across Borders¹, 2012); educational institutions are admitting foreign students and opening campuses in different parts of the world in unprecedented numbers (Marklein, 2013; Schuster, 2013); and interpersonal relationships are cutting across national boundaries more than ever before (Charsley, 2013). As the journalist Thomas Friedman famously noted, the world is becoming increasingly "flat" (Friedman, 2005).

Research is only starting to document the psychological ramifications of these foreign experiences. For instance, studies have shown that foreign experiences enhance creativity (Gohari, Maddux, Shijlow, & Galinsky, 2015; Leung & Chiu, 2010; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Lu,

Martin, Usovva, & Galinsky, in press; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009), reduce intergroup bias (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchitpewan, & Wang, 2012), and promote career success (Maddux, Bivolaru, Hafenbrack, Tadmor, & Galinsky, 2014; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Yet, many important questions remain unanswered. In particular, it is still unclear whether and how foreign experiences have an enduring effect on a person's sense of self. Although we know that foreign experiences can lead individuals to incorporate multiple cultural identities into the contents of their self-concept (Blenc-Martin, & Harrison, 2009; Sood, Danties, Benet-Martinez, Moons, & Robins, 2013), we know less about how these experiences affect the overarching structure of their self-concept. Thus, despite Michael Crichton's assertion that going abroad may elucidate our notions of who we are, research has yet to investigate the empirical foundations of this claim.

To address this question, we tested the idea that living abroad changes a key structural aspect of the self: self-concept clarity. This construct refers to the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept are "clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). Investigating the links between living abroad and self-concept clarity makes a number of contributions of both theoretical and practical value.

First, the current research enhances our understanding of the

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