
The Multicultural Edge: Creativity, Trust and More Job Offers



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Multicultural experiences are increasingly important for surviving and thriving in the diverse, interconnected world of the 21st century. While living in foreign countries is associated with increased creativity, we find that foreign experiences give individuals numerous other psychological and practical advantages.

The idea that foreign travel might increase trust goes back at least as far as Mark Twain. As the famous author wrote in his *Innocents Abroad*, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”

Twain’s idea was that certain types of foreign travel may be beneficial because contact with a wide range of different people can lead to a more charitable view of others. We wanted to test this assertion empirically.

Increased Trust

In our paper, [**Does Travel Broaden the Mind? Breadth of Foreign Experiences Increases Generalised Trust**](#) co-written with Jiyin Cao of Kellogg School of Management, we conducted five studies that confirmed that the number of countries people visited (what we call the ‘breadth’ of travel experiences) predict increasing levels of generalised trust towards humanity as a whole.

For example, in one study, we asked 237 American undergraduates to play a trust game in the laboratory. One person played the role of a “sender”, and the other played the role of a “receiver”. The sender needed to decide how much of a US\$10 endowment to send to the receiver and was told that the amount sent would triple in value for the receiver. The receiver then had to decide how much of this tripled amount he or she would return to the sender.

The logic behind this game is that the initial amount of money sent by the sender is an indicator of trust towards the (unknown) receiver because any money sent placed the sender at risk for not getting any of it back. Thus, the amount of money sent is a proxy for the amount of trust the sender has in the receiver.

Our results showed that level of trust in a stranger was predicted by how widely the participants had travelled.

But does foreign travel actually cause an increase in trust? To find out, we ran a longitudinal study measuring generalised trust before and after a group of Chinese individuals travelled abroad. We found that those who travelled most broadly (i.e. to a larger number of countries) showed a significant boost in their overall levels of trust compared to those who travelled less broadly, or a comparable group that did not travel at all. By testing for changes in generalised trust we were able to demonstrate that broad foreign experiences do cause increases in trust.

Stronger Sense of Self

Other work currently in progress with Professors Hajo Adam and Otilia Obodaru (both of whom are alums of INSEAD’s PhD programme and are now faculty at Rice University’s Jones School of Business) shows the experience of living in a foreign country can fundamentally alter one’s sense of self. Anecdotally, people who live abroad often speak of the experience as life-changing, and say that they will never see themselves the same way again.

This might happen in two ways: While living abroad, individuals may have *self-validating experiences* that strengthen self-clarity. For example, comparing the values and norms of one's home country with the different values and norms encountered abroad may make individuals aware of their true underlying values and help them confirm or construct what they truly believe and who they really are. At the same time, individuals may also have *self-differentiating experiences* that strengthen their sense of self-complexity. For instance, engaging in new and different behaviors while abroad may make individuals aware of the contextual nature of their actions and give them opportunities to uncover new and distinct aspects of their sense of self.

Interestingly, however, most previous research in psychology shows that both self-clarity and self-complexity are associated with psychological well-being – having a clear sense of self makes us feel secure; having a complex sense of self means when something goes wrong in one aspect of our lives, we can focus on other aspects to compensate. However, these two constructs are typically negatively correlated. It is difficult to have a clear sense of self if the self is also more complex. However, we predicted that both self-clarity and self-complexity could be simultaneously enhanced when people live abroad.

This is exactly what we found. In one study, we surveyed 180 American adults and found that those who had lived abroad had both a clearer *and* more complex sense of self. In a second study, we experimentally primed 125 American adults, all of whom had lived abroad, to recall an experience they had living abroad, or an experience in their home country. Those reminded of the experience abroad subsequently felt that their self-clarity and self-complexity were higher than those reminded of an experience at home.

Practical implications

INSEAD is known as “The Business School for the World,” and as such is one of the most culturally diverse educational institutions on the planet. But does this culturally rich environment pay dividends on the job market? It turns out it does – but only if a student approaches their MBA experience at INSEAD with a desire to get fully immersed in the multicultural aspects of the programme.

In another paper, **Expanding Opportunities by Opening Your Mind: Multicultural Engagement Predicts Job Market Success** co-written with INSEAD PhD students Eliza Bivolaru and Andrew Hafenbrack, and Tel Aviv University Professor Carmit Tadmor, we looked at how much INSEAD MBA students actively engaged in multicultural activities during their 10 months on campus; in particular we measured the extent to which they 1) learned about and 2) adapted to new cultures during the programme. Adaptation and learning about other cultures help us decode new cultures in novel ways but, over time, this process of understanding and integrating what is old with what is new and different can transcend specific cultural contexts. This process can increase one's ability to consider and combine multiple perspectives, a skill psychologists call 'integrative complexity,' that is highly attractive to companies.

The sample population, 115 full-time MBA students, were asked to complete a survey at the beginning of P1 and write an essay on "the pros and cons of working in multicultural teams." The same exercises were completed ten months later towards the end of P5. We analysed these essays for their level of 'integrative complexity.' At the end of P5 we also measured how much they had adapted to and learned about other cultures during their time at INSEAD.

We found two important effects. First, the amount of multicultural engagement predicted increased in integrative complexity from the beginning of the programme until to the end. Second, this increase in integrative complexity had a positive effect on the number of job offers students received. This latter finding makes sense given integratively complex individuals are seen as creative, open to new experiences, high in initiative, adventurous, clever, and able to bring seemingly unrelated ideas together into meaningful wholes. It follows these individuals were able to successfully navigate the interview process and received more job offers.

Putting it all together

Overall, this research shows that opportunities to immerse oneself in multicultural experiences and travel opportunities should not be missed. Not only do these experiences have distinct psychological benefits, there are also considerable career benefits. However, it's important to emphasise our findings suggest it's how you embrace the multicultural experience and not just the experience itself that will make the difference. As with most things in life, what you put in is what you get out. But for those willing to make the most out of traveling, living, and working abroad, such experiences can

enrich your career prospects, and your life.



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