
Multicultural Experiences: Making the World Creative, Innovative...and Flat!



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We can talk with someone halfway around the globe as easily as with someone in the next office; sell our products in places we couldn't spell two years ago, take a job in India as easily as in Indiana. What, however, does all of this have to do with our ability to live productive careers and satisfying lives?

Over the past several years, we have conducted dozens of studies to explore how exposure to foreign cultures changes the way we think, behave, and make decisions. The most consistent finding from our work is that individuals who have lived abroad, either for personal or career-related reasons, tend to show heightened levels of creativity. For example, across several studies we find that MBA and undergraduate students who had previously lived abroad are better able to solve standard tests of creativity than those who have never lived outside their home country. We have found this to be true regardless of whether the task involved making creative connections among very different ideas; whether the creative task demanded a sudden insight;

or whether people needed to imagine something completely new. Furthermore, we have also found that MBA students who had lived abroad achieved better outcomes in negotiations exercises that demand creative solutions.

Although it is certainly possible that creative people are the ones who are, *a priori*, attracted to the experience of living abroad in the first place, further studies have been able to show the experience of living abroad in and of itself can clearly enhance creativity. In one study, participants who were asked to recall the experience of living abroad showed enhanced creativity compared to other groups who recalled more mundane experiences. And researchers in Australia have recently shown that international aid workers displayed more creativity after a year working on their international assignments.

But there is an important caveat to this creativity boost – not everyone who lives abroad becomes more creative!

Transformative Experiences

The key to whether foreign experiences are transformed into lasting creative benefits depends on the psychological approaches people take while living abroad. In particular, our work shows that those individuals who adapt their perspectives and behaviors to the new cultural context, or learn deeply about the new culture, are the ones who get the lasting creative benefits from living abroad. Furthermore, our work with Carmit Tadmor at Tel Aviv University in Israel has shown that if the experience of living or working abroad is profound enough, individuals come to be highly identified with both their home and host cultures. In other words, they become ‘biculturals.’

Biculturals, it turns out, are also more creative than individuals who only identify themselves with a single country.

Adaptation, learning, and identification all help us decoding new cultures in novel ways. Over time, this process of understanding and integrating what is old with what is new and different can transcend specific cultural contexts, subsequently increasing our ability to consider and combine multiple perspectives, a skill that psychologists call ‘integrative complexity.’ It is this psychological capacity to be intergratively complex that is how adaptation, learning and biculturalism turn foreign experiences into lasting creative benefits.

One other finding worth noting is that those who have lived abroad are not only more complex in their thinking, but they also have a clearer picture of who they are as a person – they feel more authentic. So foreign experiences often turn out to be true journeys of self-discovery.

Does It Matter in the Real World?

A critical question is professional relevance – whether international experiences and the resultant psychological changes matter for the real world, and particularly for business. Our recent work suggests the answer is a definite yes. In a study we did with Carmit we found that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who were bicultural – they highly identified with both their Israeli and American identities – got promoted faster and had better professional reputations than those that only identified with the Israeli or American identity. And our latest work, in collaboration with INSEAD professors Frederic Godart and Andrew Shipilov, has discovered that the world's most prestigious fashion houses produce more creative fashion collections when the companies' creative director has had considerable experience working abroad. Finally, and a bit closer to home, we recently found that the INSEAD MBA students who learned and adapted themselves most to the different cultural experiences available during their 10 months in the MBA programme showed significant gains in integrative complexity, and as a result ended up with more job offers upon graduation.

So our advice is clear for the executive looking to kickstart a career, or the entrepreneur looking for the next burst of inspiration. Don't hesitate – go abroad!



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