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# Cross-Cultural Bonding Leads to Higher Creativity



By William Maddux , INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Andrew C. Hafenbrack , Assistant Professor at Católica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics

## **A close friendship or romance with someone from another culture can enhance outside-the-box thinking.**

The stamp in one's passport doesn't always define the distance one has travelled. For some professionals, an overseas stint is an opportunity to change not only their surroundings but also themselves – to become more broad-minded and creative people. Previous research suggests that expats who deeply engage with the local culture by mixing with locals and learning their language, for example, tend to **become more creative** and enjoy greater professional success after returning home than those who stick to expat enclaves.

If what matters most for creative growth is the bridges you build between cultures, not the physical borders you cross, perhaps leaving home isn't absolutely necessary. After all, globalisation has produced an unprecedented mingling of cultures and ethnicities, as is evident on the streets of nearly every major global city (much to the outrage of the far right). The chance to form cross-cultural bonds could be as close as the next street corner, or the

next cubicle.

Regardless of the surroundings, close personal relationships – including romantic relationships – with people from other cultures can be a source of creative enrichment, as we uncovered in research recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (our co-authors were Jackson Lu, Dan Wang, and Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School, and Paul Eastwick of UC-Davis). You don't have to be a social omnivore to reap these benefits; even a deep, long-lasting connection with one person can have a meaningful impact.

### **“Have you dated...?”**

For our first study, we administered creativity tests to 115 INSEAD MBA students (representing 39 nationalities) at both the start and finish of the 10-month programme. We also asked them whether they had been romantically involved with someone from another culture during their time at INSEAD. The 24 students who responded “yes” also displayed higher creative performance across the board.

In a subsequent study, we asked participants who dated individuals from both their home country as well as foreign cultures to write about any dating experience they chose, before taking creativity tests. We found not only that those who opted to reflect upon a cross-cultural dating experience did better on the tests, but also that the rise in creativity was specifically linked to inter-cultural learning experiences described in the essays. These results showed that learning about a different culture strengthens cognitive flexibility, and by extension, creativity.

In a third study, we analysed participants' dating histories in greater detail alongside their creativity test scores. Interestingly, the duration of past inter-cultural romantic relationships was the most significant predictor of creative performance, while the number of such relationships was not significant.

Finally, we broadened our research beyond romance to study intercultural friendships as well. Surveying 2,226 professionals from all over the world who had formerly worked in the United States, we found that those who were still in close contact with friends they made in the U.S. were more likely to have started their own business after returning home, and (in the case of non-entrepreneurs) more likely to be a force for innovative change in their workplace.

## Grasp learning opportunities

Strolling through the campuses of elite schools such as INSEAD, one hears a variety of languages being spoken by students, faculty and staff. The same could be said of the bustling offices of many major multinationals. Diversity in and of itself can be exciting, but if globalised citizens remain within their language and culture bubbles, golden opportunities for cross-cultural learning will be missed. Making a conscious effort to step outside your cultural comfort zone – by, for example, organising a language exchange programme in your hometown – can enrich you personally and professionally.

In addition, our findings suggest that organisations can foster a more creative workforce by embracing diversity and then capitalising on it through facilitating close cross-cultural collaboration among employees. In addition, organisations should treat the cultural differences of their diverse workforce as priceless learning opportunities, rather than encouraging conformity to a corporate mono-culture.

Governments also have a role to play. The voices of globalisation's detractors have grown louder of late, yet, as our results show, building walls between cultures runs counter to innovation, the engine of future economic growth. Clearly, policymakers in developed countries must work harder to focus public attention on globalisation's benefits to society at large, and the economic risks that lie along the populist path.

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