
Watch Out for the Well-Travelled



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Sampling a wide array of cultural norms can blur people’s moral vision.

Candidates with international experiences are highly sought-after in the global talent wars. Multinational corporations view diverse cultural experiences as essential to success in an increasingly globalised world. Academic research confirms this, with studies by us as well as others finding that minds broadened by living or working abroad are more likely to show heightened creativity and devise innovative solutions to complex problems.

Specifically, research shows that overseas travel promotes “cognitive flexibility”, the ability to see problems and situations from multiple vantage points. Exposure to different customs and mores, the thinking goes, liberates and expands one’s mental repertoire. Simultaneously, the process of assimilating diverse information gleaned from other cultures sharpens one’s imaginative vision. As a result, one becomes adept at envisioning and implementing alternatives to established ways of doing things.

However, the mental benefits of extensive foreign experiences may have a moral downside, as detailed in our recent research paper published in the *[Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#)* (co-authored with Jordi Quoidbach, Francesca Gino and Alek Chakroff). Hopping between many moral frameworks can loosen the ties that bind people to the most basic values, such as fair play. Put simply, cognitive flexibility may be accompanied by moral laxity.

“The dark side of going abroad”

In the first of our studies, we surveyed a group of French high-school students before, during and after a 6- or 12-month study abroad programme. In all three phases, the students were offered a chance to win an iPad by completing a series of anagrams—but, unbeknownst to participants, one of the anagrams was impossible to solve. Thus, anyone who reported having solved it was cheating. Before going abroad, 30.1 percent of the students cheated on the task; after 12 months abroad, the incidence of cheating rose to 47.7 percent.

Subsequent studies more closely investigated the link between foreign experiences and immorality. In one study involving MBA students, we noted that the number of countries participants had lived in—as opposed to the amount of time they had lived abroad—positively predicted their willingness to use immoral negotiation tactics.

We also found that participants who temporarily reflected on personal experiences that occurred across foreign countries were more likely to cheat on the anagram task than those who temporarily reflected on a lengthy stay in one foreign country. They were less bothered by moral lapses as well. This appeared to suggest that the breadth, not the depth, of overseas experience was the factor related to immorality.

Moral relativism

We hypothesised that because the well-travelled are accustomed to being immersed in different cultural environments, they tend to develop a more flexible sense of right and wrong. In other words, they are more susceptible to moral relativism, which has been found to result in immoral behaviour.

Indeed, our final set of studies found that moral relativism statistically explained why participants’ breadth of foreign experience predicted their

tendency to behave immorally.

Class and corruption

Keen-eyed observers might point out that people's extent of foreign experiences is roughly in step with their social class. At first glance, our results might seem to be a rehash of past research showing **a higher prevalence of immoral behaviour** at the upper reaches of the social scale. But they remained robust even after explicitly controlling for education and income, suggesting that participants' foreign travel—rather than their social status—was responsible for the increase in immorality.

Also, we controlled for the Corruption Perception Index and the Crime Index for all countries concerned—both participants' home countries and the countries they travelled to. In other words, the change in morality appears not to be due to the influence of a particular culture, but rather to the effect of wide travel.

Restoring absolutes

Ambitious professionals shouldn't let the potential moral hazards dissuade them from going overseas, however; the cognitive benefits of living abroad are still well worth pursuing. Most importantly, our results suggest that international experiences can help individuals appreciate and understand the different moral codes found in other cultures.

But how can companies guard against the moral slippage that can come with broad overseas travel? First, they should think carefully before assigning several overseas postings to the same manager in close succession. The danger may stem from a moral rootlessness and relativism that can set in when an expat professional can't settle down in any particular place. Second, organisations should reinforce moral absolutes by committing to values and codes of conduct. There should be no confusion about what does and does not constitute acceptable behaviour; consequences should ensue for those who transgress moral boundaries. In this way, sojourners will be more likely to stay within the moral grid, without compromising their creative energy.

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