The influence of host cultures on the role of personality in the acculturation of exchange students

Daisung Jang, Do-Yeong Kim *

Ajou University, South Korea

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

For a limited period of time, exchange students study abroad in a host culture they may know little about, leaving behind their culture, social networks and institutions. In the current study, students going to collectivist countries and students going to individualist countries were investigated, to test if the different characteristics of the host cultures would produce different patterns of acculturation. For the individualist-bound students, there was evidence to suggest that personality is an important factor in determining their acculturation, while for collectivist-bound students, there was evidence to suggest that adherence to cultural norms and values is an important factor in determining acculturation. Implications for exchange students were discussed.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Exchange students leave behind their social lives, including social networks, and familiar cultural environments to study at the host country. Upon arriving, they are likely to find differences in social and cultural rules, norms and values embedded in the surrounding environment and people (Berry, 1997). In adapting to the host culture, they undergo a process of acculturation, defined as "when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns..." (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). In this study, exchange students going to collectivist and individualist countries were monitored in their level of acculturation across the semester, with the aim of observing if adapting to different kinds of cultures would result in a different pattern of acculturation. In addition, the role of personality was investigated as a crucial factor in acculturation.

1.1. Personality and acculturation

One of the core processes in dealing with another culture is to recognize that the assumptions, symbols and meanings may fundamentally differ among people (Beamer, 1992), implying that the student in an exchange program should question their assumptions, and understanding of symbols and meanings in the host country. Personality has been presumed to be a factor in such processes because it remains as one of the few enduring psychological factors which could influence their acculturation since they are removed from their previous social lives (Mak & Tran, 2001). Furthermore, while state-like individual differences may not be maintained when moving to a different country, relatively stable trait-like individual differences are more likely to be predictive of behavior across cultures (Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh, 2006). Previous research has shown the five factor model of personality to be suited for research in acculturation because the five factor model has been

---

* Corresponding author at: School of Business, Ajou University, San 5, Wonchun-Dong, Yeongtong-Gu, Suwon, 443-749, South Korea.
E-mail address: kimd@ajou.ac.kr (D.-Y. Kim).

replicated across cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Furthermore, it has been shown that some of the five factors are a correlate of cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2006), and are associated with acculturation in a new country (Mak & Tran, 2001) as well as cross cultural training outcomes (Lievens, Harris, Van Keer, & Bisqueret, 2003).

The five traits imply different internal processes and thus, different outcomes. A review of recent relevant studies (Ang et al., 2006; Lievens et al., 2003; Mak & Tran, 2001) revealed that openness to experience and extraversion have consistently been associated with both psychological and behavioral aspects of acculturation, while conscientiousness has been associated with psychological acculturation. However, neither agreeableness nor neuroticism has shown a consistent relationship with acculturation variables.

In the context of the current research on exchange students, specific predictions were not made because of the exploratory nature of our investigation. Instead, a much more interesting question was to investigate if the characteristics of the host culture would influence the expression of personality on acculturation. The next section details the dimensions of acculturation investigated in this study.

1.2. Acculturation dimensions

Two dimensions of psychological acculturation were investigated. *Cultural identity* was defined as the degree with which exchange students feel a part of the host culture. It would be reasonable to expect that people who permanently integrate with a society (e.g. migrants) would experience a psychological need to become a part of that culture. But for exchange students, whose stay is limited, there may be no increase in cultural identity because they would not have a need to identify with the host culture.

Cultural knowledge was defined as the amount of knowledge one has about a particular culture. It was assumed that increasing levels of cultural knowledge across the semester would indicate a more culturally competent student, one of the goals of the exchange semester. However, the characteristics of collectivist and individualist cultures may imply different patterns of acculturation, where fundamentally different reasons are responsible for a student showing greater levels of cultural knowledge.

1.3. Interaction of personality and culture type

It was hypothesized that the values of the two representative groups of cultures, collectivist and individualist, would result in different patterns of psychological acculturation. Collectivist values include the consideration of significant others as well as the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1994), and social norms and in-group aspirations may take relative precedence over personal concerns (Suh, 2002; Triandis, 2000). Also, while social norms have been shown to be a predictor of subjective-wellbeing (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998), self-consistency (i.e. showing individuality by being consistent across situations) has a much weaker relationship with self-esteem in collectivist cultures compared to individualist cultures (Campbell et al., 1996), suggesting that adherence to social norms is endorsed in collectivist cultures. This implies that acculturation in a collectivist culture is the process of being familiar with social norms, and that increased time spent in a collectivist culture (i.e. having more exposure to social norms) will result in acculturation.

In contrast, individualist cultures place importance on the self. Self-determined attitudes are important ("highlighted and privileged"; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Triandis, 2000), and such attitudes are presumed to predict social behavior (Suh, 2002). Furthermore, Campbell et al. (1996) have demonstrated that self-consistency is a stronger determinant of self-esteem in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures, demonstrating that individualist cultures endorse expression and maintenance of individuality. This implies acculturation in individualist countries involves consistent expression of the student's personality across social situations. Therefore, higher levels of acculturation may be found in those students who exhibit greater levels of personality factors since it is likely that greater extremes of personality factors should result in greater consistency across situations. However, since social norms play a less important role in the acculturation process in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures, greater exposure to the host culture may not translate to greater acculturation. That is, levels of acculturation may not increase across the semester.

1.4. Summary of research questions

The aim of the study was to observe the influence of personality in the pattern of acculturation in two groups of students; students from a collectivist country going to individualist countries and students from individualist countries going to a collectivist country. For the collectivist students going to institutions in individualist countries, it was predicted that personality factors would show significant correlations with psychological acculturation, since individualist cultures regard personal agency as being more important than social norms. But for the individualist students going to an institution in a collectivist country, it was predicted that levels of acculturation should increase across the semester since increased time spent in the culture would result in greater exposure to social norms, regarded in collectivist cultures as being more important than personal agency. In addition, since such a pattern does not involve the student's internal dispositions, it was expected that personality factors would not be associated with acculturation variables.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and participants

Two groups of exchange students were investigated during the spring and fall semesters of 2007 and 2008. 110 individualist-bound students (age $M = 24.15$, SD = 1.78, 45 female and 24 did not report gender) going to individualist countries (Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA) from Ajou University, South Korea, were surveyed. All were Korean students with Korean parents and heritage. 157 Collectivist-bound students (age $M = 22.45$, SD = 2.53, 82 female), from Australia, Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the US coming to a university in a collectivist country (Ajou University, South Korea) were surveyed. Students did not previously live or have exchange semesters in the host country.

All students were contacted by email at 0 months (start), approximately 1.5 months (middle), and at approximately 3 months (end) and asked to complete questionnaires online. Personality was measured only at 0 months, while other variables were measured at all time points. The response window was about 1 week. Dropout rates were 21% at 1.5 months and 39% at 3 months for the collectivist-bound students and 19% at 1.5 months and 52% at 3 months for the individualist-bound students.

2.2. Measures

Personality was assessed using the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO-FFI is a 60-item, 5-point scale (1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree) measure, and was used to assess neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the respective factors. Acculturation was assessed using a modified version of the Asian American Multidimensional Acculturation Scale (AAMAS; Chung, Kim, & Abreu, 2004). The AAMAS is a 15-item, 6-point scale (1 – Not very much to 6 – Very much) questionnaire assesses cultural identity (6 items) or how much one feels a part of the culture, and cultural knowledge (3 items) or how much one knows about a culture. In all subscales, higher scores indicate higher levels of acculturation. Existing Korean translations of the NEO-FFI (Ku, 2005) were given to Korean students, while the other measures were first translated to Korean by a bilingual speaker and then edited by a native Korean speaker, and was then presented to a third bilingual speaker for verification. English measures were provided to all collectivist-bound students.

3. Results

3.1. Acculturation patterns

To test the hypothesis that acculturation would increase for collectivist-bound students across the semester, and to observe the pattern of acculturation in individualist-bound students, a separate repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted for each of the respective variables. The critical result was the within-subjects main effect of differences within the semester, i.e. differences between the start, middle and end of semester. To control for differences between the semesters when the data were collected, the period of the exchange semesters were coded as a categorical variable and entered as a between-subjects factor.

Collectivist-bound exchange students reported higher levels of cultural knowledge by the end of semester, $F(2, 46) = 3.72$, $p = .03$ (start $M = 2.12$, SE = .17; middle $M = 2.54$, SE = .26; end $M = 2.74$, SE = .28). While there were no differences between the start and middle of semester, $t(46) = 1.74$, $p = .10$, and between the middle and end of semester, $t(46) = 1.01$, $p = .32$, there was a significant increase from the start to the end of semester, $t(46) = 2.46$, $p = .02$. However, there were no changes in cultural identity, $F(2, 46) = .09$, $p = .92$ (start $M = 4.13$, SE = .17; middle $M = 4.11$, SE = .17; end $M = 4.16$, SE = .17).

Individualist-bound students reported no change in cultural knowledge across the semester, $F(2, 64) = 2.88$, $p = .06$ (start $M = 2.45$, SE = .21; middle $M = 2.76$, SE = .16; end $M = 2.84$, SE = .19). Also, there was no change in the level of cultural identity, $F(2, 64) = 1.21$, $p = .31$ (start $M = 4.12$, SE = .14; middle $M = 3.96$, SE = .15; end $M = 4.05$, SE = .13).

3.2. Personality and acculturation

To test the hypothesis that the personality of individualist-bound students would be associated with acculturation, and that the personality of collectivist-bound students would not be associated with acculturation, personality measured at the start of the semester was correlated with acculturation dimensions (cultural identity and cultural knowledge) obtained at the middle and end of semester. To control for differences between the semesters when the data were collected, the period of the exchange semesters were coded as a categorical variable and controlled for by calculating partial correlations.

Table 1 shows evidence to suggest personality is associated with acculturation dimensions for individualist-bound students. At the middle of semester, extroversion, openness and conscientiousness were associated with higher cultural knowledge. In addition, extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness were associated with higher cultural identity. In contrast, at the end of the semester, there were few correlations between personality factors and acculturation variables, suggesting personality has a larger influence at the beginning and middle than at the end of semester.

Table 1
Partial correlations between personality factors and acculturation dimensions for individualist-bound exchange students.

Measures	Cultural knowledge	Cultural identity
Middle of semester (1.5 months), $N = 70$		
Neuroticism	−.02	−.07
Extroversion	.29*	.37**
Openness	.26*	.23
Agreeableness	.08	.23*
Conscientiousness	.29*	.40**
End of semester (3 months), $N = 43$		
Neuroticism	.21	.01
Extroversion	.10	.11
Openness	.37*	.26
Agreeableness	.13	.20
Conscientiousness	.33*	.37*

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

For the collectivist-bound students, there were no significant correlations between personality and cultural knowledge as well as personality and cultural identity, supporting the hypothesis. This supports the idea that acculturation in a collectivist culture does not involve stable characteristics of the exchange student. Together with the results showing that collectivist-bound students show an increase in acculturation across the semester, the data supports the overall idea that in a collectivist culture, the student's characteristics do not influence acculturation, but instead, acculturation may occur as a result of becoming familiar with the host culture's social norms and values.

4. Discussion

As predicted, the analyses revealed a different pattern of acculturation for the students going to collectivist and individualist countries. For collectivist-bound students, personality factors were not associated with cultural knowledge, while nevertheless levels of cultural knowledge rose by the end of semester. This supports the hypothesis that acculturation in a collectivist country is more likely to be dependent on learning about social runes, norms, and values. Overall, the data suggests that individualist students in a collectivist culture experience acculturation in a way that does not involve personality. For individualist-bound students, while personality was associated with acculturation measures, levels of cultural knowledge did not increase across the semester. This suggests that acculturation in individualist cultures is more dependent on the personality of the students than other factors such as adherence to social norms.

One other notable result for both students going to collectivist and individualist countries was that cultural identity did not increase across the semester, suggesting exchange students may not experience a psychological need to identify with the host country, due to the temporary nature of their stay.

4.1. Implications for the management of exchange students

The data suggest that the exchange students' experience of acculturation cannot be generalized over different kinds of cultures, and implies that different implications exist with regard to the management of exchange students. In particular, it may be important for the students to acknowledge differences in what ways the host culture differs from their own in terms of important concepts, such as the notion of the self, the nature of social relationships and the implications for social behaviors in a culture different to their own. Individualist students may be surprised to learn that people in collectivist countries may act in inconsistent ways, yet feel that is appropriate and normal to do so, but in contrast, collectivist students may be surprised to learn that people in individualist countries are encouraged to act consistently, with relatively little regard for social norms (Suh, 2002).

Informing students of such differences will be the basis on which they can rationalize cultural differences in a functional way. Especially for exchange students, whose stay is limited, and who do not have a need to develop a sense of identity with the host nation, it may be productive to learn to acknowledge differences, and modify their behaviors in a different way for a short period of time than to engage in efforts to integrate them into the host society. On a practical level, institutions could open courses focusing on cross cultural issues, with the teaching style focused on student discussions, with the participation of both host and exchange students. Also, institutions could sponsor social events between those host country students who have previously visited the exchange student's country, who would be well placed to discuss the differences and offer relevant perspectives and answers. More communication between the exchange students themselves may facilitate adjustment. Informally, it was found that collectivist-bound students, the vast majority of whom shared a single dormitory, were able to readily share information due to frequent interactions. Such structural factors could also be used to facilitate adjustment. Ultimately, host universities are the student's interface with the host culture (Schein, 1996), and could potentially shape the acculturation experience.

4.2. Limitations and directions for future research

The limitations of this study are based on sample characteristics. While the individualist-bound student sample was homogenous, their host institutions were different. In contrast, while the collectivist-bound sample was heterogeneous, their host institution was the same. Also, only indirect evidence was given for the acculturation patterns of the collectivist-bound exchange students – future studies should further test the impact of cultural values such as social norms, and personal agency and how they interact with personality to produce a particular pattern of acculturation.

5. Conclusions

Potential exchange students may not realize that personality and culture play a large role in shaping their experiences while abroad. Being aware of how the host culture shapes the acculturation experience should make a considerable contribution towards a successful exchange semester. An informed host university could have the ability to offer appropriate assistance and create policies to facilitate the creation of culturally aware students.

Acknowledgements

References

Ang, S., Van Dyne, L., & Koh, C. (2006). Personality correlates of the four-factor model of cultural intelligence. *Group & Organization Management, 31*(1), 100–123.

Beamer, L. (1992). Learning intercultural communication competence. *Journal of Business Communication, 29*(3), 285.

Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46*(1), 5–68.

Campbell, J. D., Trapnell, P. D., Heine, S. J., Katz, I. M., Lavallee, L. F., & Lehman, D. R. (1996). Self-concept clarity: Measurement, personality correlates, and cultural boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*(1), 141–156.

Chung, R. H. G., Kim, B. S. K., & Abreu, J. M. (2004). Asian American multidimensional acculturation scale: Development, factor analysis, reliability, and validity. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*(1), 66–80.

Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO personality inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO five-factor inventory (NEO-FFI): Professional manual.* Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Ku, J. (2005). *The relationship among personality, efficacy beliefs, life experiences and subjective well-being: Indigenous psychological analysis.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea.

Lievens, F., Harris, M. M., Van Keer, E., & Bisqueret, C. (2003). Predicting cross-cultural training performance: The validity of personality, cognitive ability, and dimensions measured by an assessment center and a behavior description interview. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*(3), 476–488.

Mak, A. S., & Tran, C. (2001). Big five personality and cultural relocation factors in Vietnamese Australian students' intercultural social self-efficacy. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 25*(2), 181–201.

Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1994). A collective fear of the collectives: Implications for selves and theories of selves. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 568–579.

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (1997). Personality trait structure as a human universal. *American Psychologist, 52*(5), 509–516.

Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. (1936). Memorandum on the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist, 38*, 149–152.

Schein, E. H. (1996). Culture: The missing concept in organization studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41*(2), 229–240.

Suh, E. M. (2002). Culture, identity, consistency and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(6), 1378–1391.

Suh, E., Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Triandis, H. C. (1998). The shifting basis of life satisfaction judgments across cultures: Emotions versus norms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*(2), 482–493.

Triandis, H. C. (2000). Cultural syndromes and subjective well-being. In E. Diener & E. M. Suh (Eds.), *Culture and subjective well-being* (pp. 13–36). MA: The MIT Press.