

Study: Living abroad leads to a clearer sense of self

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Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

Living abroad can clarify your sense of self, according to new research by a team of social scientists at Rice University, Columbia University and the University of North Carolina.

They found living abroad increases "self-concept clarity," the extent to which individuals' beliefs about themselves are clearly and confidently

defined and consistent and stable over time.

The researchers are Hajo Adam and Otilia Obodaru of Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business; Jackson Lu and Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School; and William Maddux of UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School. They conducted six studies involving 1,874 participants and published their findings in "The Shortest Path to Oneself Leads Around the World: Living Abroad Increases Self-Concept Clarity" in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

To conduct the studies, the authors recruited participants from online panels and United States and international MBA programs, including some who had not lived abroad, who then completed surveys on living abroad.

The researchers found living abroad triggers self-discerning reflections in which people grapple with the different cultural values and norms of their home and host cultures. These reflections are helpful in discovering which values and norms define who people are and which simply reflect their cultural upbringing, according to the study.

"In a world where living-abroad experiences are increasingly common and technological advances make cross-cultural travel and communication ever easier, it is critical that research keeps pace with these developments and seeks to understand how they affect people," the authors wrote.

"In this vein, our studies demonstrate that living abroad affects the fundamental structure of the self-concept by enhancing its clarity. The German philosopher Hermann von Keyserling wrote in the epigraph to his 1919 book 'The Travel Diary of a Philosopher,' 'The [shortest path](#) to oneself leads around the world.' Almost 100 years later, our research provides empirical evidence in support of this idea."

While most research on foreign experiences has focused on whether people have lived abroad or not, this new research takes a more nuanced approach to distinguish between the depth and the breadth of international experiences. It finds that depth (the length of time lived abroad) rather than breadth (the number of foreign countries lived in) enhances a clear sense of self. The longer people live abroad, the more self-discerning reflections they accumulate and, as a result, the more likely they are to develop a better understanding of themselves and have increased clarity about career decision-making, the authors said.

Understanding the impact of living abroad has practical implications for organizations as they operate across national borders and recruit foreign talent.

Past studies have found that transitional experiences, such as getting divorced or losing a job, typically decrease individuals' self-concept clarity. In contrast, this research examines the possibility that living abroad is a rare kind of transitional experience that actually increases self-concept clarity.

Extended periods of time spent in a foreign country can yield numerous benefits that come with a clear sense of self, ranging from greater life satisfaction to decreased stress, improved job performance and - as the new research shows - enhanced clarity about the types of careers that best match an individual's strengths and values. Having a clear sense of self could thus become increasingly important in today's world with its unprecedented range of available career options, according to the authors.

More information: Hajo Adam et al. The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.01.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.01.002)

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