

Living outside the box: New evidence shows going abroad linked to creativity

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Living in another country can be a cherished experience, but new research suggests it might also help expand minds. This research, published by the American Psychological Association, is the first of its kind to look at the link between living abroad and creativity.

"Gaining experience in foreign cultures has long been a classic prescription for artists interested in stimulating their imaginations or honing their crafts. But does living abroad actually make people more creative?" asks the study's lead author, William Maddux, PhD, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, a business school with campuses in France and Singapore. "It's a longstanding question that we feel we've been able to begin answering through this research"

Maddux and Adam Galinsky, PhD, from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, conducted five studies to test the idea that living abroad and creativity are linked. The findings appear in the May issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association.

In one study, master of business administration students at the Kellogg School were asked to solve the Duncker candle problem, a classic test of creative insight. In this problem, individuals are presented with three objects on a table placed next to a cardboard wall: a candle, a pack of matches and a box of tacks. The task is to attach the candle to the wall so that the candle burns properly and does not drip wax on the table or the

floor. The correct solution involves using the box of tacks as a candleholder - one should empty the box of tacks and then tack it to the wall placing the candle inside.

The solution is considered a measure of creative insight because it involves the ability to see objects as performing different functions from what is typical (i.e., the box is not just for the tacks but can also be used as a stand). The results showed that the longer students had spent living abroad, the more likely they were to come up with the creative solution.

In another study, also involving Kellogg School MBA students, the researchers used a mock negotiation test involving the sale of a gas station. In this negotiation, a deal based solely on sale price was impossible because the minimum price the seller was willing to accept was higher than the buyer's maximum. However, because the two parties' underlying interests were compatible, a deal could be reached only through a creative agreement that satisfied both parties' interests.

Here again, negotiators with experience living abroad were more likely to reach a deal that demanded creative insight. In both studies, time spent traveling abroad did not matter; only living abroad was related to creativity.

Maddux and Galinsky then ran a follow-up study to see why living abroad was related to creativity. With a group of MBA students at INSEAD in France, they found that the more students had adapted themselves to the foreign cultures when they lived abroad, the more likely they were to solve the Duncker candle task.

"This shows us that there is some sort of psychological transformation that needs to occur when people are living in a foreign country in order to enhance creativity. This may happen when people work to adapt themselves to a new culture," said Galinsky.

Although these studies show a strong relationship between living abroad and creativity, they do not prove that living abroad and adapting to a new culture actually cause people to be more creative. "We just couldn't randomly assign people to live abroad while others stay in their own country," said Maddux.

To help get at this question of what causes someone to be creative, the authors tried a technique called "priming." In two experiments, they asked groups of undergraduate students at the Sorbonne in Paris to recall and write about a time they had lived abroad or adapted to a new culture; other groups were asked to write about other experiences, such as going to the supermarket, learning a new sport or simply observing but not adapting to a new culture.

The results showed that priming students to mentally recreate their past experiences living abroad or adapting to a new culture caused students, at least temporarily, to be more creative. For example, these students drew space aliens and solved word games more creatively than students primed to recall other experiences.

"This research may have something to say about the increasing impact of globalization on the world, a fact that has been hammered home by the recent financial crisis," said Maddux. "Knowing that experiences abroad are critical for creative output makes study abroad programs and job assignments in other countries that much more important, especially for people and companies that put a premium on creativity and innovation to stay competitive."

More information: "Cultural Borders and Mental Barriers: The Relationship Between Living Abroad and Creativity," William W. Maddux, PhD, INSEAD; Adam D. Galinsky, PhD, Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University; [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), Vol. 96, No. 5.

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