A broad experience

Dinsa Sachan considers the evidence on how foreign living shapes us

Recent research shows that people who live abroad are often more creative and successful in their careers. But there's also one big downside associated with foreign experiences.

In a globalised world, psychologists are increasingly becoming interested in how multicultural experiences shape people.

In 2015 San Francisco-based psychologist Steve Orma and his wife spent eight months in Europe. The experience turned their lives upside down. They are thankful for that.

The goal-oriented couple were so used to their fast-paced way of living that Europe's laidback attitude pleasantly surprised them – and forced them to rethink their lifestyle. 'People really slow down and enjoy life there,' Orma says. 'They have really long meals.' Taking a cue from the French, the Ormas started to have two-hour dinners. 'We actually sit at the table to eat,' says Orma. 'Earlier, we would eat in front of the TV – and it would be done in 30 minutes.' In fact, they have stopped watching TV. During their after-work hours back home, they go for walks, sip some wine, and listen to music. 'We like to enjoy the experience and just be in the moment,' Orma says.

Travel mavens have known this for a long time – travelling and living abroad can be life-changing, and Orma's story isn't particularly unique. Thanks to high-speed internet around the world, many people can work remotely. That has given rise to the so-called culture of 'digital nomads' – professionals who hop from one country to another in search of an ideal working location. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that 500,000 Britons spend a few months every year living in another part of the world for work. Moreover, British college students are increasingly heading to exotic places for exchange programmes and volunteer experience.

But psychologists have only recently begun to investigate the impact of foreign experiences. They have found that it affects us profoundly – in both good and bad ways.

The ticket to creativity

A study published in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* in 2012 found that spending time amid different cultures makes people more creative. The researchers tested 135 students in a US university, 45 of whom had lived in another country for periods ranging from two weeks to three months. Others in the group hadn't lived abroad yet or were never planning to. The team gave all the groups questionnaires about creativity. One questionnaire tested cultural creativity, while the

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other tested more general creativity. David Therriault, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Florida and a co-author of the study, says his team was interested in seeing whether international living helped people translate their cultural knowledge to more general day-to-day challenges. The general creativity test, for example, asked participants questions about what kinds of troubles they would encounter if they woke up and learned they could fly. The cultural test asked participants questions such as: What would happen if you woke up and your skin had turned a different colour? The researchers found people who had live-abroad experience scored better than others on both cultural and general creativity tasks. 'Our speculation is that any travel experience could help to bolster creativity if it was sustained (probably several weeks) and in a novel enough environment,' says Therriault.

Carmit Tadmor's quest to understand the impact of travel on creativity began when she moved to the US to study. 'During my PhD Program in 2006 at the University of California, Berkeley, I was so

homesick and alone,' says Tadmor (Coller School of Management, Tel-Aviv University). She wondered if it had all been worthwhile. 'Then I realised that as a scientist, I can actually research this question.' Her dissertation was titled: 'Biculturalism: The Plus Side of Leaving Home?' 'For me, that question mark was key. I wasn't sure, but I wanted to find out,' says Tadmor.

Tadmor found that foreign experiences have benefits – but not for everyone. In a compelling study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2012, Tadmor and her colleagues looked at two types of people who had lived abroad – one group had learned to adopt the beliefs and values of another culture while still practising those from their own (biculturals), and the other type either strictly stuck to their home culture (separated) or completely moulded themselves into the ways of the host country (assimilated).

Tadmor took 78 MBA students from a business school in Europe. All participants had lived in a country other than their home country for at least a year. Participants were shown a brick on the screen and were asked to come up with creative uses for the object (flowerpot maybe, or BBQ). Biculturals outperformed other types of students – assimilated and separated – in this task. The students were also asked to write out answers to complex questions like: 'Describe a situation taken from school, business, civil, or military life, where you did not meet your personal objectives, and discuss briefly the effect.' This essay-type task was designed to assess a trait called integrative complexity. That's basically the ability to take into account multiple perspectives. 'Integrative complexity allows people to come up with unique combinations and ideas,' explains Tadmor. Again, the bicultural group flourished, suggesting that their creative advantage is a result of this coveted trait.

Similarly, Tadmor found that biculturals had also created more products and innovative businesses during the course of their careers. In fact, they were promoted more often and had better reputation. The researchers controlled for the Big Five personality traits in this study.

Flexible thinking gives biculturals an edge. 'Each culture is composed of a set of values, norms and beliefs that provide people with well-established habits and scripts to guide their attitudes and behaviours,' says Tadmor. 'When individuals are in a new country, these old scripts may no longer be viable and often conflict with the behaviours, values and norms that characterise a new foreign culture.' Biculturals resolve those conflicts by finding solutions that combine elements of both cultures. Over time, this ability starts translating into their work.

Angela Leung, an associate professor of psychology at Singapore Management University, Singapore, has uncovered another aspect of this kind of creative benefit. In a study published in *Creativity Research Journal* in 2008, Leung and her colleagues performed two tests, asking participants to generate unusual uses for a common household item, and to write the first 20 occupations that came to their mind. The team found that the people who had more multicultural experience fared better in both tests if they were open to new experiences. Generally, people who are more open to new experiences are also more outgoing and social. 'People with this trait are more receptive to ideas from another culture,' says Leung. 'For example, some people who are forced to study abroad by their parents don't benefit from their multicultural experience because they aren't necessarily open-minded.'

Grown-ups benefit too

The majority of research in this field is conducted on students. But there's some proof that working adults enjoy the same cognitive perks. Chiara Franzoni, an associate professor of management at the Polytechnic

Transformation

Sarah Allen's story also proves that a new culture can transform people professionally. For Allen, life as a psychologist in government service in England was simple: get referrals, see patients, and get a salary at the end of the month. But when Allen moved to the US with her husband 20 years ago, things took a U-turn. America's work culture came as a shock to her. She noticed everyone was tooting their own horn. 'I was never a business person back in England,' says Allen. 'Here, you've got to be doing marketing, social media, websites and accounting, and you really have to put yourself out there to get clients.' Like many Britons, Allen, who is still a member of the British Psychological Society, isn't one to 'blow her own trumpet', but she has succeeded in overcoming that reticence over the years. 'I feel a lot more confident putting myself out and asking for business,' she says. Not only does Allen have a successful private practice in Northbrook on the outskirts of Chicago, she also heads a non-profit for women with post-partum depression.

University of Milan in Italy, has looked at scientists who have devoted a considerable time working in a different country. Franzoni and her colleagues sent out email requests to 47,000 first authors of papers in four areas of science. They ended up surveying 14,299 out of those responded, and published their findings in *Economic Letters* in 2013. The researchers reported that migrant scientists had performed better compared with their domestic counterparts: they had published in journals with higher Impact Factors.

There was one caveat: some scientists get international jobs because they are just brilliant. Franzoni says they controlled for this 'selection effect', and explains that there are many possible reasons why international faculty perform better. 'One important reason is that a scientist is in a location where they can maximise their potential,' she says. 'For example, a high-energy physicist would gain from being in an institute which has an accelerator.' She points out that not only are international experiences helpful for scientists on an individual level, it's also good for science in general.

A 2013 study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* found another instance when active immersion in a multicultural environment led to success in the job market. It was led by psychologist William Maddux, and Tadmor was a co-author. The researchers recruited participants from a 10-month international MBA programme. The students were drawn from the school's two campuses in France and Singapore. It was an exceptionally multicultural group, with representatives from 39 countries, most of whom were not from the host countries. The participants had to write an essay at the beginning of the programme and one at the end of it. These essays evaluated integrative complexity – the same trait that Tadmor measured in her previous study. The students who scored high on integrative complexity received a higher number of job offers.

The more, the better?

What's better: travelling to many countries or spending a lot of time in one foreign country? It remains a mystery, but a researcher named Jiyin Cao is beginning to unravel it.

Cao, an assistant professor of management at Stony Brook University, New York, conducted five experiments and found that a broad range of foreign experiences made people more trusting of strangers. In the study, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* in 2013, Cao and colleagues took 237 undergraduate students, who had to play a game that essentially tested whether or not they would trust a stranger. One person was supposedly a receiver and the other the sender. The sender could send a fraction or all of $10 to the receiver. Then that amount would be tripled, and the receiver could choose to send back – or not – a fraction of that tripled amount. The participants didn't know this: every player was a sender. The researchers were just trying to test 'trustability' – participants were sending money to strangers with no guarantee of getting that money back. The participants had to fill out a questionnaire later detailing their travel experiences – both short trips to countries as well as long-term travel experiences. They found people who had been to a lot of countries, compared to ones who had a longer travel-abroad experience in one country, were more likely to trust strangers.

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The quality that Cao tested is called generalised trust. 'It expands individuals' social radius,' says Cao. 'People are typically constrained in their local circles.' In general, it helps to have a certain level of trust in others. 'If you trust and are nice to other people, you are more likely to be treated nicely. This rule works in almost any culture,' Cao adds. But Cao cautions that the trust that she studied is not targeted towards any specific relationships: for example, the relationship between a mother and a child. Other research has found that people with more generalised trust are happier, on an individual level. This quality also seems to be beneficial for communities at large. In societies where there's more generalised trust, people tend to cooperate better, Cao says. 'That in return is good for the society's economy,' she says.

In another set of studies, Tadmor found that people with extensive multicultural experience tend to be less biased toward other races. So, does travel just makes people better human beings all round?

But beware the dark side

Frank Farley, a professor of educational psychology at Temple University, Florida, and a past president of the American Psychological Association, concludes that foreign travel presents a person with risk and challenges. 'Such experiences can strengthen one's resilience and capacity to handle change and unpredictability,' he says. But can such risks spill over into a dark side?

In a paper published in January this year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Jackson Lu, a PhD candidate at Columbia University, New York, argued that foreign experiences may make people more decadent. In the team's first experiment, a group of French-speaking students were asked to solve anagrams for the chance to win an iPad. The challenge: solve nine in nine minutes, one after the other. There

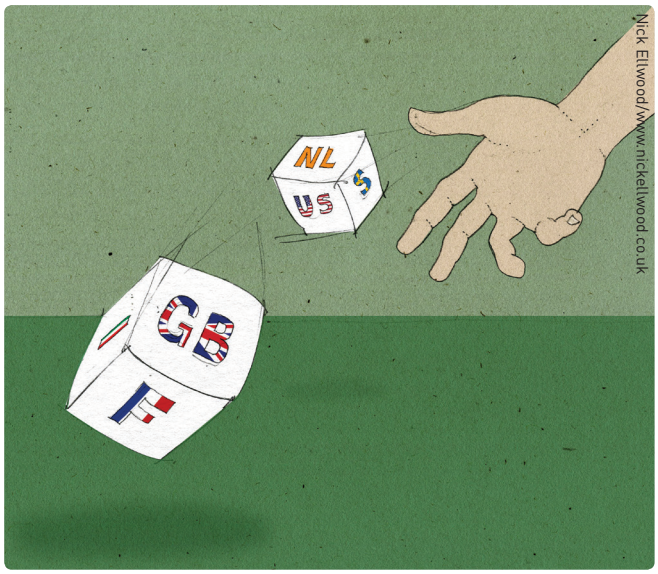
was a catch: the fourth anagram was impossible to solve. Anyone who claimed to solve it actually cheated to increase their odds of winning the iPad. Here's what the researchers found: 30 per cent of the students cheated before leaving for abroad; but around 46 per cent cheated after living abroad for six months, and 48 per cent after a year.

In the second experiment, participants who had visited a foreign country were divided into three groups. The first were asked to reflect on a day during their experience in a foreign country. The second were asked to reflect on a day from their experience living in their hometown. The third, a control group, were asked to write about their last trip to the supermarket. Next, portraying it as a test of luck, the researchers asked the participants to roll a die. Depending on the die outcome, which they were supposed to report, they would get a bonus. If they reported a 1, they would get $1. The researchers had a hypothesis: people in the foreign-experience condition were likely to report higher outcomes. 'It's a fair die, so the self-reported outcomes should really be uniform across the board,' says Lu. 'But, of course, what you see is that many people lied to make extra money.'

In fact, almost everyone cheated. 'People overwhelmingly reported 4, 5, and 6. In other words, in all three groups, people cheated,' says Lu. 'But what's interesting and striking is that in the foreign-experience group, many more people reported six.'

In other experiments, Lu's team sought to find what was responsible for immoral behaviour: breadth of foreign experiences (the number of countries a person has visited) or depth (the number of years they have spent living abroad). It turned out that it was the breadth which was predictive of immoral behaviour.

Lu cautions that not every widely travelled person would behave like that, it's more of a general trend. But he does believe this study has important implications for our increasingly globalised world, where companies and colleges are sending students and employees to foreign countries in huge numbers.



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Where to, now?

It's frequently said that 'travel broadens the mind', and Mark Twain wrote: 'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.' So can we conclude the research supports this view?

It's clear that living abroad has a lot to offer, but the 'selection effect' remains a concern. It makes sense: enterprising and creative people are more likely to move abroad for better opportunities, aren't they? Cao says the selection effect could be at play in some of the studies, but researchers try their best to avoid it. 'In many multicultural studies, scholars use multiple methods to test the idea,' she says. 'For example, they use longitudinal studies to track people's creativity and trust before and after living or travelling abroad.' These qualities have been shown to increase after travelling or living abroad. 'It suggests that there is a causal effect,' Cao says.

Leung says that the selection effect is indeed 'very much possible'. 'We need to conduct experimental studies to manipulate the degree of multicultural exposure people have,' she concludes. For example, in one of her studies, Leung used a slideshow and showed pictures of different cultures to participants. 'I used the slideshow as an induction session to expose people to one or two cultures,' says Leung. 'This study can help establish the causal link that multicultural exposure causes people to be creative.'

Aside from that, Cao would like to see some studies that look into exactly how much living abroad is considered 'optimal'. 'Does the positive effect stop after a certain point, for example after one travels to a certain number of countries?' she says. 'Why would that be?'

Beyond the empirical evidence, the personal stories certainly suggest that everyone has something to gain from foreign living, and that engagement with locals makes foreign experiences worthwhile. Sarah Allen (see box. p.46) says one major reason she has assimilated so well in America is because she bent over backwards to make American friends. When she was new in the country, she mostly hung out with expats. It also helps that her family loves American holidays. 'Our house is actually on the July 4th parade route so we always have friends over to watch the two-hour-long parade and have a barbecue or ice-cream afterwards,' says Allen. 'Our friends think it is rather ironic that British people are throwing a party to celebrate Independence Day but it's fun!'