

The Relationship between International Experience and Cultural Intelligence with the Moderating Effect of Acculturative Stress

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Abstract

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) has been identified as a critical competency in responding to globalization. Recently, the number of students with international experience has increased because international experience has been viewed as one method of developing CQ. During the process of CQ development, negative psychological factors might influence the results. This study discusses CQ from a psychological perspective. The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between international experience and CQ, and the moderating effect of acculturative stress. This quantitative research used a survey approach to collect the data. Snowball sampling, a convenience sampling approach, selected Taiwanese students with international experience as the subjects. Correlation analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were used to analyze the hypotheses. The results remind us that understanding the knowledge of a culture and engaging deeply in a culture are the value of experiencing an intercultural context.

Keywords: International experience, cultural intelligence, acculturative stress.

1. Introduction

Diverse opportunities are provided for individuals to interact with culturally different people in the global village. Various methods are introduced for approaching and learning about different cultures. Recently, the way to communicate with those who own different cultural backgrounds became a highly discussed issue (see Bennett [8]). Nowadays, numerous individuals move to a brand new foreign country for the purpose of accumulating international experience. However, unfamiliar surroundings bring individuals great difficulty in adaption, which results in living a life with lower satisfaction (see Johnson et al. [21]). Understanding cultural knowledge, overcoming cultural difficulties, and successfully interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds has become an important issue in the era of globalization.

Earley and Ang [16] present the idea of Cultural Intelligence (CQ). In recent years, enterprises have been arranging formal education courses or training programs for management or their workforce to gain cultural knowledge and improve their cross-cultural

abilities (see Alon and Higgins [1]). This shows that CQ is an issue that has been highly focused upon. Studies present CQ as a key ability for groups of people who desire good cooperation (see Triandis [35]).

The obvious influence of international experience (IE) on CQ has been pointed out in the literature (see Ng et al. [28], Şahin et al. [31]). Studies have discussed how outstanding individuals with these two factors, IE and CQ, are better equipped to respond to globalization (see Li et al. [23], Ng et al. [27]). Previous studies generally focused on the significant effect or advantages of IE and CQ. Instead of continuing in this vein, the current research concentrates on the process of how IE influences CQ. Moreover, the results of IE on CQ found by previous studies are mostly observable, while this study tends to focus on the psychological factor, which is more intangible.

During the period of IE, one's psychological status affects CQ development. According to Sommer [34], in an unfamiliar environment, some individuals encounter trouble in adaptation. Adjustment is a process that individuals are forced to go through while living their lives in new circumstances (see Misra et al. [24]). Intercultural problems that differ from those found in the origin of the individual cause psychological pressure and become a source of acculturative stress (AS) (see Crockett et al. [15]). AS is a negative psychological influence that this research will study in depth as it touches on IE and the resultant process of CQ development.

2. Research Purpose and Questions

Individuals who possess IE are expected to have an understanding of different cultures. The number of international students has increased year by year because organizations started to value the talents that come with cultural understanding. The accumulation of IE makes an international student a person with a more competitive advantage while job seeking or in the workplace. Therefore, the accumulation of IE for this purpose brings out the first research question of this study as the following:

Does international experience positively affect cultural intelligence?

As mentioned, previous studies about IE and CQ have mostly focused on the outcomes. The present study concentrates on filling the gap in knowledge from the aspect of psychology. Individuals who live their lives in a new environment have a great chance of encountering difficulties in adapting to the unfamiliar place (see Johnson et al. [21]), and the difficulties lead to AS. This study investigates the moderating effect of AS on IE. This gave rise to the second research question of this study, namely:

Does acculturative stress negatively moderate the relationship between international experience and cultural intelligence?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Theoretical background

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) presented by Kolb supports this study; According to Kolb [22], learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created

through the transformation of experience, knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p.41). Basically, experiential learning is the process in which individuals learn by doing (see Gibbs [19]). CQ can be raised through experience (see Earley and Peterson [17]); thus, individuals can develop CQ through international experiential learning. ELT is the theoretical basis upon which this study is built.

3.2. Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Earley and Ang [16] define CQ as “a person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings, that is, for [sic] unfamiliar settings attributable to cultural context” (p. 9). The interaction between individuals and the environment is the core notion of CQ. An individual with high CQ is capable of deciphering the essential actions. Thus, they have the ability to interact well with people from diverse backgrounds because they can give accurate feedback that fits the recipient’s culture (see Earley and Ang [16]). CQ comprises four components: cognitive CQ, metacognitive CQ, motivational CQ and behavioral CQ (see Earley and Ang [16]). Cognitive CQ refers to “a general knowledge and knowledge structure about the culture” (see Ang et al. [3]). The knowledge of different cultures makes those individuals with a higher cognitive CQ better appreciate and interact with diverse cultures (see Ang and Inkpen [2]). Metacognitive CQ refers to “the mental processes that individuals use to acquire and understand cultural knowledge” (see Ang et al. [3]). Individuals with higher metacognitive CQ are conscious of others’ cultural preferences throughout their interactions (see Brancu et al. [14]). Motivational CQ reflects “the mental capability of an individual to direct attention and energy toward learning and functioning in situations characterized by cultural differences” (p.514) (see Ng et al. [27]). Those with strong motivational CQ feel confident about their capability to function in various cultures (see Ng et al. [27]). Behavioral CQ refers to “the capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures” (p.101) (Ang et al. [3]). Those with high behavioral CQ are able to perform adequate actions while interacting with people who are culturally different (see Ng et al. [27]).

3.3. International Experience (IE)

In this study, IE refers to “international education experience” (see Bloodgood et al. [13], Sommer [34]). The European Parliament and Council [18] explain IE as “a period of learning abroad, which includes formal and non-formal learning, or mobility undertaken by individual young people or adults, for the purposes of formal and non-formal learning and for their personal and professional development” (p.8). IE is valued in it that it develops the ability to see personal issues differently than others from ones native culture may see them (see Archer and Davison [5]). Past research believed that IE influences the cultural understanding and performance that are demanded in various cultures (see Moon et al. [25]), that if individuals live their life overseas, they directly connect with those from different cultural backgrounds and gain knowledge and skills

from various cultures through observation and interactions (see Aycan [6], Black et al. [12], Moon et al. [25]), and that these experiences get transformed into their cultural knowledge.

(1) Hypothesis 1: International experience has a positive effect on cultural intelligence.

3.4 Acculturative Stress(AS)

Rather than jumping in to explain AS, we should first discuss the concept of acculturation. According to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits [30], “acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (p.149). Acculturation is a cultural learning process that results while individuals are in contact with other cultural groups (see Berry [9]). Based on this definition of acculturation, AS can now be discussed. Berry et al. [11] defined AS as “one kind of stress that stems from the process of acculturation. Specific states that occur during acculturation are lowered mental health status (specifically confusion, anxiety, depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, a heightened level of psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion” (p.492). Generally, it is the influence on ones mental state that occurs during the process of cultural adjustment (see Smart and Smart [33]). International students experience various types of stress (see Mori [26], Parr et al. [29], Ye [37]). When negative experiences occur or one experiences negative effects during the process of acculturation, physical and emotional stress result (see Berry [10], Han et al. [20]). According to Baum [7], stress can be defined as “a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, and behavioral changes” (p.653). Once again, CQ is an ability that can be enhanced through experience (see Earley and Peterson [17]). Therefore, when negative experiences and AS appear during ones IE, the negative influence on CQ is expected to moderate the process of CQ development.

(2) Hypothesis 2. Acculturative stress negatively moderates the relationship between IE and CQ.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research framework

The research framework of this study, as shown in Figure 1, was informed by the literature review and designed to meet our research purpose. The independent variable is international experience; the dependent variable is cultural intelligence. Lastly, the moderator is AS. The study investigates the relationship between IE and CQ, and the moderating effect of AS.

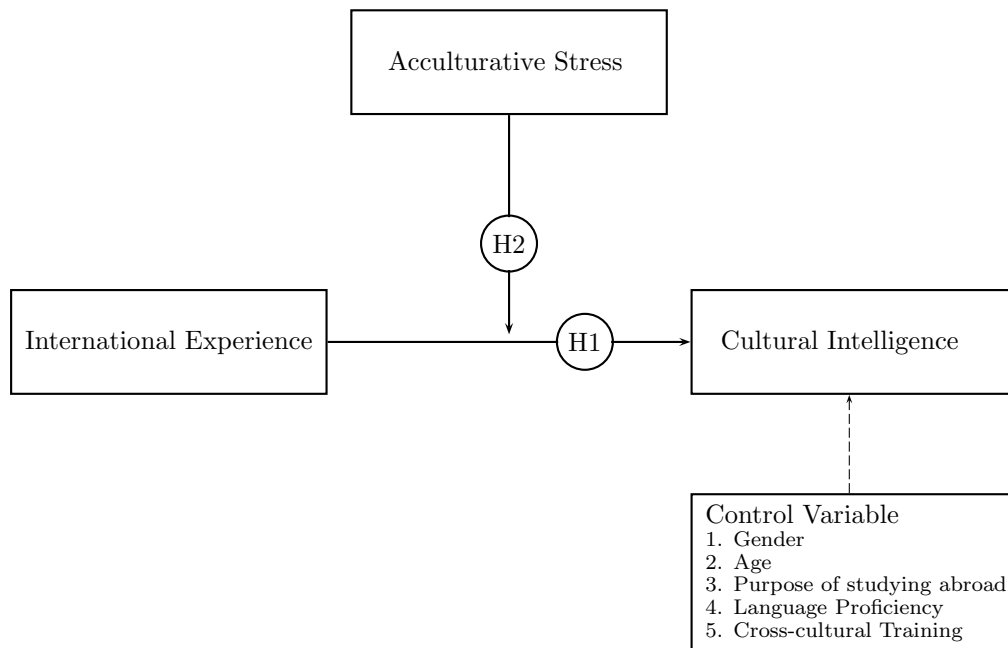


Figure 1: Research Framework.

4.2. Instrument

The research instrument used to collect data was a questionnaire that was then analyzed with a quantitative approach. According to personal feelings, participants chose the statement that best described their personal situation. The questionnaire constructs were measured by three different scales, namely IE, CQ and AS. Information about IE was obtained by the following 2 questions: “How many months did you study there?” “How familiar would you say you were with the cultural aspects before and after you went to the country where you studied?” The Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) developed by Ang et al. [4] was adopted in this study. The scale consists of 20 items in the following four dimensions: metacognitive CQ (4 items), cognitive CQ (6 items), motivational CQ (5 items) and behavioral CQ (5 items). AS as the moderator in this study was measured by the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) developed by Sandhu and Asrabadi [32]. ASSIS consists of 36 items designed along 7 dimensions: perceived discrimination (8 items), homesickness (4 items), perceived hate/rejection (5 items), fear (4 items), stress due to change (3 items), guilt (2 items), and miscellaneous (10 items).

4.3. Control variables

Age, gender and the purpose of studying abroad were controlled in this study. Furthermore, language proficiency being the top cross-cultural adjustment issue that international students face during their study overseas (see Tseng & Newton [36]) was

included as a control variable. Expatriates reduce frustration and decrease international blunders through the assistance of cross-cultural training (see Zakaria [38]). Therefore, prior cross-cultural training was considered a control variable in this study.

4.4. Instrument validity

The sample used in the study was Taiwanese students with international experience. Therefore, the questionnaire was translated into Mandarin (traditional Chinese). Care was taken in the translating by starting with forward translation, and followed by translation comparison and revision, then peer review, and lastly, expert review in order to preserve instrument equivalence.

4.5. Sample

The target population of this study was Taiwanese students with international experience. Based on the literature review, IE in this study refers to various types of international educational experience including degree seeking, exchange programs, and language learning. The questionnaire, published online, was open to any student with the experience mentioned above. Excluding questionnaires with invalid responses, 142 respondents' questionnaires were included in the data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive analysis

The descriptive analysis is based on the 142 valid questionnaires returned and the demographic information about the participants presented in Table 1. Most of the respondents were female (88.7%, $n = 126$). The age of international Taiwanese student respondents ranged from 18 to 34 years (94.4%, $n = 134$). Generally, the main purposes of studying abroad were to participate in an exchange program (32%, $n = 46$), get a master's degree (26.1%, $n = 37$) and to get a bachelor's degree (23.9%, $n = 34$). Students' language proficiency before studying abroad ranged from basic to advanced whereas the majority ranged from intermediate to fluent after their stay overseas. This shows that the language proficiency of international students improved during their stay overseas. More than half of the students received cultural training in the context of their study program (61.3%, $n = 87$).

5.2. Correlation and reliability analysis

The Cronbach's Alpha of the Chinese version of the CQS and ASSIS was examined and is presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's Alpha of the entire CQS was .897. ASSIS as a moderator had the Cronbach's alpha at .934. Since an acceptable Cronbach's alpha value is over .70, the scales used in this study indicate good reliability of the measurement.

Table 3 shows the correlation analysis among the dependent variables and the control variables. According to the table, age negatively correlated with students' language

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	15	10.6
	Female	126	88.7
Age	18-24 years old	60	42.3
	25-34 years old	74	52.1
	35 or more years old	8	5.6
Purpose of studying abroad	Bachelor's Degree	34	23.9
	Master's Degree	37	26.1
	Doctorate Degree	2	1.4
	Exchange Program	46	32.4
	Language Learning	23	16.2
Language Proficiency (Before)	No Competence	11	7.7
	Basic	38	26.8
	Intermediate	60	42.3
	Advanced	23	16.2
	Fluent	10	7.0
Language Proficiency (After)	No Competence	0	0
	Basic	9	6.3
	Intermediate	44	31.0
	Advanced	55	38.7
	Fluent	34	23.9
Cultural Training Course	Yes	131	61.3
	No	226	38.7

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha Value.

Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
International Experience (IE)	3	-
Cultural Intelligence (CQ)	20	.897
Acculturative Stress (AS)	36	.934

proficiency before studying abroad ($r = -.337, p < .01$). Naturally, language proficiency positively correlated before and after studying abroad ($r = .607, p < .01$). As for the independent variables, cultural familiarity before studying abroad had a positive relationship with CQ ($r = .322, p < .01$). Additionally, cultural familiarity after studying abroad positively correlated with CQ ($r = .512, p < .01$) and AS ($r = .229, p < .01$). Furthermore, CQ positively correlated with AS ($r = .343, p < .01$).

Table 3: Correlation Analysis.

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Gender										
2. Age	.045									
3. LP (B)	-.084	-.337**								
4. LP (A)	.004	-.154	.607**							
5. CTC	.105	.003	.095	.080						
6. IE1: Length	.077	.243**	-.165	.207*	.163					
7. IE2: CF (B)	.015	-.253**	.370**	.218**	-.051	-.171*				
8. IE3: CF (A)	.010	-.062	.029	.221**	-.242**	.111	.567**			
9. CQ	.108	-.017	.004	.201*	-.073	.037	.322**	.512**		
10. AS	.026	.060	-.056	-.038	-.148	-.044	.151	.229**	.343**	

Note. * $p < .05$ $N = 142$

** $p < .01$ Age was measured in years; (B): Before; (A) After
 LP: Language Proficiency; CTC: Cultural Training Course;
 IE: International Experience; IE1: Length was measured by month;
 CF: Cultural Familiarity
 CQ: Cultural Intelligence; AS: Acculturative Stress

5.3. Hypothesis tests

The hypotheses were tested via hierarchical linear regressions conducted by SPSS 23.0, the results of which are shown in Table 4. Hypothesis 1 predicted that IE is positively related to CQ. According to the statistical results, the relationship between IE and CQ is significant. IE3 measured cultural familiarity after studying abroad ($\beta = .404$, $p < .001$). The overall R^2 shows that IE explains 35.3% of the variation in CQ. The significance of F change ($\Delta F = 13.891$) represents the positive relationship between IE and CQ. AS did not show a significant moderating effect on the relationship between dependent and independent variables. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

6. Discussion

The literature has viewed IE as an important factor that enhances CQ. The results support the relationship between IE and CQ (Hypothesis 1). It was found that the length of the overseas study actually had no significant influence on CQ. Based on the results, cultural familiarity before studying abroad had no significance whereas after studying abroad, it became significant. The insignificance of cultural familiarity before studying abroad suggests that even though an individual has an understanding of culture, its effect on strengthening ones CQ is not obvious without experience. The different response to ELT after personally experiencing an international environment is evident in the results: cultural familiarity enhances CQ.

Table 4: Results of moderating effect on CQ.

Variables	Cultural Intelligence (CQ)		
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Controls			
Gender	.103	.081	.076
Age	-.033	.003	-.001
LP (Before)	-.180	-.155	-.150
LP (After)	.312**	.214*	.217*
CTC	-.091	.066	.074
Independent Variables (IV)			
IE1: Length		-.076	-.066
IE2: CF (Before)		.057	-.077
IE3: CF (After)		.404***	.392***
Moderator			
Acculturative Stress (AS)		.245***	.252***
IV \times Moderator			
IE1 \times AS			.102
IE2 \times AS			-.414
IE3 \times AS			-.762
R^2	.080	.353	.362
Adjusted R^2	.047	.309	.302
ΔR^2		.272	.009
F	2.378*	7.996***	6.090***
ΔF		13.891***	.594

Note. * $p < .05$ $N = 142$

** $p < .01$ Age was measured in years; (B): Before; (A) After

*** $p < .001$ LP: Language Proficiency; CTC: Cultural Training Course;
IE: International Experience; IE1: Length was measured by month;
CF: Cultural Familiarity; CQ: Cultural Intelligence;
AS: Acculturative Stress

Hypothesis 2 predicted that AS has a negative effect on the relationship between IE and CQ. This prediction, however, was not supported by the results. This suggests that any AS which students may go through during cross-cultural interaction does not directly moderate the relationship between IE and CQ.

7. Implication and Conclusion

Previous literature has suggested that IE helps develop CQ. The present study sup-

ports this and has found that no matter how short or long the time that an individual has experienced life abroad, the increase in cultural familiarity through IE enhances CQ substantially. In response to globalization, this study provides Taiwanese students with a direction in which to move in order to become more competitive. The results of this study also remind us that it is not merely the physical placement of oneself in an international environment but also the understanding the cultural knowledge of the host country that are key to strengthening CQ.

Although AS was shown to be of no significance in moderating the relationship between IE and CQ, it is still an issue worthy of discussion. Cultural difference is a daily life issue that many international students encounter (see Parr et al. [29]), and while experiencing these difficulties, physical and emotional stress results (see Berry [10]). The ability to manage and overcome cross-cultural stress is an issue that should be valued in order to survive in the era of globalization.

In general, IE provides opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. In approaching new cultures, how the individual faces positive or negative situations and reflects on their handling of each situation transforms them in their personal cross-cultural experience; this may truly be what affects CQ.

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