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Do stays abroad increase intercultural and general competences, affecting employability?

Petia Genkova¹ · Lisa Kruse¹

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Abstract

With a globalized and growing world market, companies and educational institutions are getting more and more ambitious to re-orient their work patterns to the international level. Universities reacted to the demands of the globalized economy for flexibility and adaptability by the internationalization of their study programs. Research question: Do stays abroad and therefore intercultural experiences of students actually promote occupational competences and personal development? Design: In order to investigate this relationship, an online survey was employed, and a sample of $N = 367$ students, who had spent at least one semester abroad before, was recruited. The questions were aimed at measuring characteristics of the participants' stays abroad, as well as occupational engagement, resilience, intercultural competence personality characteristics related to job performance. Results: The findings suggest that experience abroad can partly enhance employability by serving as an additional job qualification. The results reveal that people who have experienced a stay abroad show higher work and study commitment and are more ambitious regarding their work. Furthermore, people with experience abroad show higher levels of resilience. They are more active concerning problem solving and have higher abilities to maintain emotional distance to work. Additionally, people show the more cultural intelligence the longer they stay abroad. Regarding the manifestation of cultural intelligence, the contact quality with the host country nationals played a significant role. It was evinced that higher contact quality is associated with higher values of cultural intelligence. Regarding occupational performance capacity, the results highlight that participants with a stay abroad are more dominant in an occupational context, i.e., they are more oriented towards superiority above others. Value: The present study contributes to the understanding of relevant personal skills and characteristics in intercultural contexts and of how personality might affect the process of becoming more competent. By demonstrating that stays abroad can increase certain work-related competences for students this study indicates that companies and educational institutions should spend more resources on fostering experiences abroad of students and workers, in order to stay in tune with the requirements of globalization.

Keywords International mobility · Intercultural competence · Acculturation · Stay abroad · Competence

1 Introduction

In the context of globalization, employees are confronted with increasing challenges in their working environment and in their individual working life. International competition is growing, thus increasing the pressure on organizations and individuals to maintain global competitiveness.

Universities reacted to this development by designing study programs much more internationally orientated to enable students to compete on a global level (Heublein et al. 2011; Lörz et al. 2016). Furthermore, projects, such as Erasmus have been founded. The European exchange program Erasmus + reported that until 2020 four million people will have gained their experience abroad with one of their programs (Erasmus 2017). Due to the amount of the spent resources, it becomes is of high significance to evaluate what the benefits are when universities and governmental programs are sending students abroad. This raises the question if stays abroad and therefore cultural experiences of students actually result in the enhancement of specific competences and thereby the ability to fulfill employment selection criteria and interact

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in occupational contexts successfully. Moreover, it should be clarified whether stays abroad can also change personality characteristics which are related to employment criteria.

The present study followed seminal perspectives of intercultural psychology on competences, culture and stress as well as acculturation (Genkova 2019). Drawing on perspectives from these fields, this study examined consequences of a stay abroad on intercultural competence, on resilience and engagement, participants' attitudes to work as well as personality characteristics that are potentially related to work requirements. In previous studies (e.g. Tracy-Ventura et al. 2016), results were either difficult to compare to common psychological approaches, as they often relate to very specific culture-comparing study models rather to common psychological measurement tools or an occupational focus; or they were too superficial and general to allow concrete conclusions (e.g. Zimmermann and Neyer 2013). To build a bridge between the literature on cultural studies and psychology, the present study uses instruments which are prevalent in psychological research.

2 Rationale

Presenting results of a study on the development of personality through stays abroad, Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) discuss the concept of personality development against the background of the current state of research on changes of personality. They argue, that even though personality traits are influenced by genetics to a significant degree, there are indications that changes in agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability occur in response to social context and the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Roberts et al. 2005; Zimmermann and Neyer 2013). One mechanism which links social context conditions to the development of personal characteristics is described by the theory of the Social Investment Principle (Roberts et al. 2005), which reasonably argues that personality is mostly the result of experiences related to the fit to social roles in young adulthood. According to Zimmermann and Neyer (2013), relevant life-events (like a semester abroad) might catalyze a process in which an individual (partially deliberately) strengthens or mitigates a certain trait over time (Tracy-Ventura et al. 2016).

Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) draw on the experiential learning theory, specifically to explain gains or changes in personality during a stay abroad. Learning can be defined as a process in which an individual creates knowledge by grasping and/or processing experience. Learning can thus be conceptualized as a four-stage cycle, consisting of (1) the concrete experience, which allow for (2) reflections. These reflections are the basis for (3) abstract concepts. From these

concepts, new actions can be derived, and these actions, in turn, can be (4) actively tested (Kolb 1984; Kolb et al. 2001).

Thus, Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) indicate that intercultural interaction requires grasping and transferring previous experiences to overcome daily difficulties. Obviously, Wolff and Borzikowsky and Tracy-Ventura and colleagues provide different, but compatible perspectives. Considering both of them provides a link between experiences, competences and personality. This leads to the assumption that even though personality is seen as partially determined by genetics, it also depends on experiences. Based on this assumption, and since employability depends on specific competences and aspects of personality, employability could be decisively affected by stays abroad.

Employability, however, is a vague concept and requires further definition. Previous research has shown that intercultural competence, resilience, job engagement, participants' attitudes to work, as well as job specific personality traits are linked to an individual's job performance in his or her home-country (Schaarschmidt and Fischer 2008; van Dyne, Ang and Koh 2008; Hossiep and Krüger 2012) and therefore should be considered as employability. In this context, this term refers to the actual job performance capacity of an individual rather than to the ability to be successful in an employee selection procedure. Therefore, it is synonym to the broader sense of the definition of competence by Schnabel (2015), who defines it as the ability to act appropriately and effectively. The quality of a selection process depends on its validity, i.e., the degree to which the performance in a selection procedure correlates with the later job performance. However, the validity of a selection process is often compromised, for example due to elements of deceptions or a lack of efficacy of the interviewing and other selection methods (Kanning 2019). Therefore, the term employability can only relate to the job performance and should not be misinterpreted as the ability to succeed in personnel selection procedures.

As already mentioned, performance capacity as defined above refers to a certain culture rather than to multiple cultural settings. Thomas (1993, p. 380, transl. by the author) defines culture as "for a society, organization and group very typical orientation system". It influences the perception, thinking and acting of all members of the particular culture. Consequently, if members of different cultures get in contact with each other, they adapt to a certain degree to the deviating orientation systems of the respective other group. Ward et al. (2001; in Wolff and Borzikowsky 2018) provided a comprehensive framework for the affective (stress and coping), behavioral (cultural learning) and cognitive (social identification) (ABC-model) approaches to acculturation. Building on this conceptual framework, this study focuses on competence related aspects, which are closely related to the affective and the behavioral perspective.

According to Driscoll and Torres (2020), acculturation is a dynamic component of immigrants' cultural adaptation. Most models of acculturation are based on the seminal bi-dimensional perspective of Berry (e.g., 2009), considering the cultural heritage of the immigrant as well as the culture of the receiving society (Schwartz et al. 2010). However, effective interaction with individuals from the receiving culture requires the development of certain behaviors. These behaviors which are part of the receiving cultural repertoire might strongly differ from preferences or the orientation system of the specific individual. Situations that require a certain degree of adaptation are likely to be stressful when they exceed the limits of the individual's current behavioral and affective repertoires. While acculturation is associated with acculturative stress, not all developments of acculturation are experienced as stressful (Driscoll and Torres 2020). Acculturative stress is defined as stress which can be caused, for example, by rejection of a societal minority group by the majority. More generally, acculturative stress relates to social factors which have an impact on the success or failure of (the preferred) acculturation processes (Obschonka et al. 2010). The failure of acculturation and the experienced stress related to acculturation have been shown to predict several psychological diseases such as anxiety, depression and PTSD, which are connected to the development of other, more severe diseases. Moreover, acculturative stress impairs the personal performance of an individual, which causes even more stress (Steel et al. 2017). Several studies explored the circumstances that lead to or alleviate acculturative stress. For example, Bekteshi and van Hook (2015) showed that for immigrants in the United States English language deficiencies and discrimination experiences significantly predicted acculturative stress. Studies on other cultural regions elicited similar results. Uslucan and Brinkmann (2018), for example, summarized the findings from multiple studies on the experiences of Turkish immigrants in Germany. They report that acculturative stress was widespread, even for long-term immigrants, and is related mostly to daily issues like insufficient language proficiency or a lack of insights into daily political or societal processes. In line with these results, Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) showed that the mastering of intercultural hassles leads to enhanced emotional stability.

Of particular relevance for the analysis of stays abroad is a finding in the qualitative part of the study of Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016). They observed that the US-American students who had spent time in Europe described several events in their semester abroad that led to a change of perspectives and abilities, e.g., social and emotional problem solving. In a similar vein, by a longitudinal study with foreign students in the United States, it was indicated that both engagement and the expectations that the stay abroad would improve

career options in the home country were negatively related to acculturative stress (Franco et al. 2019).

2.1 Engagement

According to Schaarschmidt and Fischer (2008), engagement is characterized by occupational ambitions, high subjective meaning of work, high endeavor for perfection and high career orientation. However, people with high engagement and low resilience are more likely to show restlessness, inefficient problem solving as well as a high tendency towards resignation. Engagement is a decisive factor for candidate selection nowadays (Kanning 2019). With adaptation to and living in the new culture, new views and perspectives, which do not exist in one's own culture, become accessible to the individual. Thus, stays abroad provide a broad range of opportunities to the individual, to develop personal characteristics as well as to broaden one's horizon (Thomas 2003).

Netz (2012) investigated motives for stays abroad. Individuals, who decided to spend time abroad mostly wanted to work in the international business world and advance their career. Furthermore, people who stayed abroad have higher income due to their jobs in internationally orientated enterprises (Netz 2012).

In total, these results suggest that people with higher levels of engagement could have stronger motives to go abroad and are more likely to succeed there. The present study further elucidates the relationship between stays abroad and engagement. Consequently, hypotheses 1 is formulated as: People who experience a stay abroad show higher work engagement afterwards.

2.2 Resilience

Northouse (2016) explains the construct of psychological resilience as the ability to manage, adjust, and overcome serious challenges. Resilience manifests itself in a high ability to remain emotionally distant from one's job, active problem solving, ease of mind or psychological balance and low resignation tendency (Schaarschmidt and Fischer 2008). Considering the studies presented above suggests that individuals who spent time abroad are likely to have faced additional stress, compared to those who did not (Thomas 2003).

Dresen et al. (2019) investigated the changes in personal characteristics of students during a short-term stay abroad exploratively. They report that coping with challenges like unfamiliar communication styles and other daily difficulties leads to more efficient self-regulation, a more active problem solving and a lower tendency to resignation. Dresen et al. (2019) as well as Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) suggest that sufficient experiences during a stay abroad might also lead to better affective outcomes in terms of resilience. However,

Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) provide a perspective solely on intercultural competences rather than considering employee competences.

We thus hypothesized that people who have stayed abroad have a higher resilience than those who have not (Hypothesis 2).

2.3 Intercultural Intelligence

Another important perspective of intercultural psychology on stays abroad is cultural intelligence. There is a minimum consensus among researchers (Wolff 2017; Genkova 2019; Schnabel 2015) on the definition as the ability to interpret behaviors and situations, as if he/she was a member of the unfamiliar culture (for example, understand subtexts, anticipate actions in different social contexts; Remhof 2014), and therefore act appropriately and effectively.

While the term intercultural competence emphasizes the behavioral aspect, the term intercultural intelligence refers more to the problem-solving dimension. However, the terms are mostly used as synonyms (Genkova 2019). Here, in the present article, previous results on competence and intelligence will be presented in the terms the respective authors used.

Cultural intelligence is often conceptualized as a multi-layered construct and can be differentiated into four components: The meta-cognitive component consists of mental processes that enable the acquiring of knowledge about the culture (Ang et al. 2007). The cognitive component is defined as knowledge about customs, practices and norms of the new culture. The motivational component is described as the ability to invest attention and energy into learning about the new culture (van Dyne et al. 2009). The last component, the behavioral component, is defined as appropriate behavior in intercultural situations (Ang et al. 2007). Given this composition of cultural intelligence, it is likely that experiences and interest in different cultures can strengthen cultural intelligence.

As mentioned above, Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) show from the experiential learning perspective that longer stays abroad lead to more intercultural competence. Williams (2005) argue that the development of intercultural competence depends on the actual exposition to a foreign culture during a stay abroad. In line with this argument, Dresen et al. (2019) indicate that the exposition to relevant intercultural interaction situations is likely to relate to the learning success. Therefore, an in-depth investigation on the relation between different circumstances of the stay and cultural intelligence appears to be promising.

Thus, intercultural intelligence is expected to correlate not only with the length of the stay abroad, but also with the degree of their individuals' actual exposition to the foreign culture. This degree of exposition is, according to Williams

(2005), dependent on the knowledge of the local language, the actual amount of personal contact and the quality of this contact. Herein, the amount of learning relevant situations in intercultural interaction refers to the quantity of daily interaction with members or artifacts of the respective culture. The quality refers to the subjective quality of interpersonal interactions in terms of interpersonal closeness and openness. Williams (2005) operationalizes these variables with a couple of items for each. However, she suggests that operationalizing each of them with one specific item should assess them appropriately.

Hypothesis 3 is therefore: The longer people stayed abroad, the higher the proficiency in the language of the target area, the contact quality and the contact quantity, the higher the cultural intelligence.

2.4 Employability

Mobility has become a normal part of lifestyles in the globalized western society. As a result, many individuals are confronted with a new environment to which they need to adapt. As the required adaptation is frequently demanding tradeoffs or sacrifices, individuals often must decide whether they discontinue their stay abroad or adapt to the new environment with compromises (Zick 2010). According to Berry (2011), acculturation of a migrated individual means the adaption to the circumstances of the receiving culture. Even though different psychological strategies for acculturation are known (Berry 2011), staying in another culture mostly has, *inter alia*, consequences for an individual's personality. One of the most relevant studies in the context of stays abroad in connection with personality is the longitudinal study by Zimmermann and Neyer (2013). Several changes in personality of people who came back from a stay abroad were observed, such as an increase in the personality dimensions of agreeableness, openness and neuroticism in terms of the Big Five (see also Costa and McCrae 1989). Furthermore, Zimmermann and Neyer (2013) were the first to demonstrate an increase in the personality dimension openness. In this context, the length of their stay was a determining factor. The longer the duration, the higher the increase in agreeableness and the lower the manifestation of neuroticism. However, according to Kanning (2019), general personality concepts like the Big Five lack in predictive value for job performance and can thus not be considered as employability. Hossiep and Paschen (2003) therefore developed the Business-focused Inventory of Personality (BIP). Building on the NEO-FFI, they identified job related personality traits that validly predict occupational success for a variety of professions. A multitude of studies corroborated the validity of the short version of the BIP, which is called BIP-6F, containing stability, commitment, discipline, social competence, cooperation willingness, and dominance

(the strive to have power about others) (Hossiep and Krüger 2012). Consequently, high expressions of the BIP-6F dimensions suggest high employability.

As those dimensions are expected to be influenced by life events during stays abroad, it is assumed that people with experience abroad demonstrate higher levels on these personality dimensions (Hypothesis 4).

3 Method

3.1 Measures

The present study followed a cross-sectional design, comparing participants with experience abroad to those without. Recruitment was conducted via social media posts, mostly in Facebook, in various German local groups. Participants filled out an online survey on Limesurvey. The hypotheses have not been preregistered. The data are available on reasonable request. After a short introductory text, asking participants to avoid giving answers due to social desirability, and to answer spontaneously and honest instead, participants were asked about *demographic data* (age, sex, country of origin, highest educational degree). Furthermore, they were asked whether and where they spent an academic stay abroad. Academic stays abroad include ERASMUS programs as well as any other time spent studying at a university abroad. If participants answered in the affirmative, questions about the stay abroad followed, which were taken from the *Socio-Cultural Adaption Scale* (SCAS) (Ward and Kennedy 1999; 7-point Likert scales): “How often did you have contact with local inhabitants during your stay abroad?” (several times a day—not at all). “How close was your contact to local inhabitants during your stay abroad?” (very close—not close at all). “Rate your proficiency, at the time of your stay abroad, of the language that is spoken by local inhabitants” (Mother tongue—no skills at all). “For how long did you stay abroad?” (in months). To measure employability, the assessment tool “Arbeitsbezogene Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster” was used (“—work-related behavior and experience patterns,” AVEM). In the present study, the short-version of the AVEM, the AVEM-44 was used, due to limitations of time in our interviews. The AVEM-44 consists of 11 dimensions, which are assigned to the categories of work engagement (dimension 1–5), resilience (dimension 6–8) and emotions (dimension 9–11). Those dimensions represent the personal and occupational resources of the individual which characterize the working relationship (Schaarschmidt and Fischer 2008). The measurement of cultural intelligence followed, employing the *Cultural Intelligence Scale* (CQS) (van Dyne et al. 2008). The CQS measures cultural intelligence based on the four-dimensional model of van Dyne et al. (2008). Finally, the occupational related self-image of

personality on the dimensions *stability, engagement, discipline, social competence, cooperation willingness, and dominance* were assessed via the Business-focused Inventory of *Personality – 6 Factor* (BIP-6F) according to Hossiep and Krüger (2012).

3.2 Sample description

367 graduate students completed the survey. Seventy-one percent were female, 29% male. The sample comprised students from all fields, such as technical study programs (25%), sciences (excluding teacher-trainings, 21%), educational and pedagogical programs (19%), psychology and social sciences (15%), economics (12%), others (5%; e.g. sports, arts, history in non-teaching-oriented programs); 3% did not provide information. The average age was 30.14 years.

Forty-two percent of the participants had spent a voluntary semester abroad from which they returned not longer than half a year ago. The highest number of semesters spent abroad was completed in Europe with 38%. This was followed by Asia with 18% and North America with 17%. 14% of participants stated to have completed a stay abroad in Australia, whereas 8% went to South America and South Africa. The length of stay reached from one month to five years, while most participants stayed for 6 months.

Ten percent of the participants were engaged or married, two percent reported to have at least one kid. None of the students who stayed abroad stated to have children. We assume that children are a reason not to go abroad in this period of life.

Except for having children or not, we obtained no significant differences between students with and without a stay abroad. Solely stays of academic nature were entered into the statistical analyses. Participants of occupational exchanges would probably distort the statistical findings.

4 Results

4.1 Hypothesis 1: engagement

The directed hypothesis 1 was tested with a one-sided t-test. Hypothesis 1 states that people with a voluntary stay abroad show a higher work engagement than those without. The difference was statistically significant ($t(350) = 1.85, p = 0.03$). For people who had stayed abroad, the mean for engagement was $M = 3.49$ with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.51$. For people without a stay abroad, the mean was $M = 3.33$ with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.49$. Consequently, there was evidence for hypothesis 1. People, who had completed a stay abroad evinced a significantly higher engagement.

In order to take a closer look at hypothesis 1, sub-dimensions of work engagement were tested for group differences as well. Mean differences on the dimension *occupational ambition* were investigated. We found that the mean for occupational ambition was higher for people with a stay abroad ($t(350)=3.50, p=0.005$). People with a stay abroad ($M=3.79, SD=0.79$) possessed a significantly higher occupational ambition than people without ($M=3.33, SD=0.82$).

For *subjective meaning of work*, the group difference was not significant. *Endeavor for perfection* did not evince a significant mean difference either, and there was neither a significant mean difference for expenditure willingness.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: resilience

To test hypothesis 2, the same statistical procedure as for the first hypothesis was used, namely a one-sided t-test. Hypothesis 2 assumes that individuals with experience with a stay abroad display greater manifestation or resilience, defined as *resistance, dissociation ability, active problem solving, ease of mind, even temper* and low resignation tendencies after failure. Results show a significant difference in *resilience* between people with and without a stay abroad ($t(350)=1.68, p=0.04, r=0.14$). The mean of people with a stay abroad was $M=3.01$ and had a standard deviation of $SD=0.37$, whereas the mean of people without a stay abroad was $M=2.99 (SD=0.29)$. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was confirmed. People who experienced a stay abroad show significantly higher resilience.

Also, the manifestations of *dissociation ability* were found to differ significantly ($t(350)=2.13, p=0.02$). On average, people with a stay abroad showed greater dissociation ability ($M=2.91, SD=0.56$) than people without ($M=2.72, SD=0.53$).

For the dimension *active problem solving*, the mean difference was statistically significant ($t(148.64)=2.00, p=0.02$). On average, people who have stayed abroad showed more active problem solving ($M=3.55, SD=0.59$) than people who have not spent time abroad ($M=3.34, SD=0.70$).

For *ease of mind and even temper*, no significant differences between people with and without a stay abroad were found. The difference on *low resignation tendency after failure* was not significant either.

4.3 Hypothesis 3: cultural Intelligence

In order to test hypothesis 3, we used a t-test on the group difference in the cultural intelligence of those who stayed abroad and those who did not stay abroad. Further, we examined the relationship of characteristics of the stay abroad and the intercultural competence.

Hypothesis 3 postulates that the longer people stayed abroad, the higher their proficiency of the local language, the contact quality and the contact quantity, the higher the cultural intelligence. Since this hypothesis is directed, one-sided t-tests were performed.

The means of people with and without a stay abroad differed significantly ($t(350)=5.16, p=0.01$). On average, people with stay abroad had a higher mean in cultural intelligence ($M=5.22, SD=0.85$) compared to people without ($M=4.52, SD=0.83$).

The variables *duration of stay, language proficiency, contact quality* and *quantity* with host country nationals were not distributed normally. Hence, correlations were calculated according to Spearman (Myers and Sirois 2004) to demonstrate relationships between the relevant variables. Since there was not an equidistant gradation for the variable contact quantity, the variable was not considered metrical.

A positive relationship between *duration of stay* and the manifestation of *cultural intelligence* was obtained ($r=0.32, p=0.01$). Apparently, there is a relationship between longer stays and higher cultural intelligence. The connection between *contact quality* and cultural intelligence was also significant ($r=0.31, p=0.01$). Regarding *language proficiency* and *contact quantity*, the relationship with cultural intelligence was not significant in either of the cases.

4.4 Hypothesis 4: occupational performance capacity

To examine the fourth hypothesis, we tested differences of the manifestation of *employability* and its manifestations on the sub-dimensions of the job-related personality scale. Hypothesis 4 postulates that people with a stay abroad show higher employability in terms of *stability, engagement, discipline, social competence, cooperation willingness*, and *dominance* (according to Hossiep and Krüger 2012). Due to the directed formulation of the hypothesis, significance was tested one-sidedly.

There was no significant difference for the dimension *stability*. Mean differences were neither significant for the dimension *discipline*, nor for *social competence* or *cooperation willingness*.

However, significant results for the dimension *engagement* were found ($t(350)=2.94, p=0.007$). Participants with a stay abroad showed significantly higher engagement. Furthermore, people with experience abroad showed more dominance ($M=3.41, SD=0.96$) than people without this experience ($M=3.51, SD=0.87$).

5 Discussion

Regarding the initial research question, the results imply that experience abroad can partly enhance employability by fostering professional qualifications. However, stays abroad cannot be viewed as a global competence school for occupational related competences in general.

The results reveal that people who have experienced a stay abroad show higher work and study engagement and are more ambitious regarding their work. Furthermore, people with a stay abroad show higher levels of resilience. They solve problems more actively and have higher abilities to maintain emotional distance to work. Additionally, people with experience abroad show the more cultural intelligence the longer they stayed abroad. In addition, the contact quality with the host country nationals played a significant role in the manifestation of cultural intelligence. It was evinced that higher contact quality is associated with higher values of cultural intelligence. Regarding occupational performance capacity, the results highlight that participants with a stay abroad are more dominant in an occupational context.

The present study is in line with results from the study of Zimmermann and Neyer (2013), according to which people with experience abroad display higher resilience which is linked to less perception of stress (Andrews et al. 1993). Moreover, the results support the perspective of Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) that intercultural experience is associated with changes in personality. The present study observed higher engagement and dominance for those who had intercultural experiences abroad. Yet, no differences in social competence and cooperation willingness were measured. Despite this, the results showed that people with experience abroad show different expressions of certain competences, related to occupational success. Ambition, engagement, resilience and higher dominance are especially important for positions with leadership responsibilities (Kanning 2014). Therefore, it seems reasonable that organizations ask for experience abroad in their job advertisement, even if the job does not comprise international assignments. Especially leading positions require candidates with occupational ambitions and a healthy, dominant behavior.

However, it is not clear, whether the knowledge of this relation (experience abroad might boost career options) leads to a self-selection process, that interferes with the aim of the current investigation (Netz 2012). Netz (2012) mentions this methodological problem without discussing it further. Referring to the longitudinal study of Zimmermann and Neyer (2013), we can argue reasonably that changes in personality are likely to be rooted in a stay abroad. Zimmermann and Neyer showed that the extent

of social support mediates the relationship between duration of stay abroad and the development from the pre- to the post-assessment. However, it remains unclear in how far self-selection processes might affect social interaction, rather than personality being necessarily influenced by social interactions in an international context. Zimmermann and Neyer did not include a control group without a stay abroad, which would have allowed to observe how personality develops without a stay abroad. In particular, as Zimmermann and Neyer assessed the Big Five dimensions, changes might be related to social interaction and aging rather than intercultural interaction.

The present study showed differences in the expression of characteristics between those who stayed abroad and those who didn't. In order to falsify the assumption that people who go abroad are more ambitious and dominant anyways, future studies should compare the changes of expatriates and stay-at-homes over a certain period of time.

Enhanced active problem solving along with a healthy ability to maintain emotional distance to work and increased resilience can help employees to accomplish challenges in a working context, regardless of their international orientation (Scherrmann 2015). Hence, experience abroad can serve as an indicator for employers of whether candidates can withstand stress. Moreover, experience abroad implies a certain degree of intercultural competence, which can be a decisive factor when it comes to international assignments as well as international cooperation (Obschonka et al. 2010). The finding that people with a stay abroad show higher intercultural competence leads to the conclusion that intercultural experience should not be considered as a hard criterion, but as a desirable plus. Taking the high costs for training employees in intercultural competence into account (external trainer, invested time, probably expatriation internships; Genkova 2019), it is promising to consider experience abroad in the selection process, even though the extent to which an individual is able to gain competence over a certain time seems to vary strongly.

Schnabel (2015) supports this claim by emphasizing the problem of socially desired answers in staff selection questionnaires. Schnabel and colleagues therefore developed a mixed method approach, which combines self-rating scales and tasks in which situations scenarios are presented and appropriate reactions have to be chosen by participants. This very specific approach might be promising especially for employee selection processes. However, the problem remains that samples with experience abroad might be biased in terms of having higher engagement and dominance anyways. Even though engagement and dominance are considered as predictors of job performance, further studies and staff selection criteria should take the motivation to go abroad into account, when considering stays abroad. This way, it can be assessed whether experience abroad has a

surplus value to specific personality characteristics. In this context, an observation from Holtbrügge and Engelhard (2016) is informative, showing that people who are more motivated to interact with other cultures increased their level of intercultural competence faster, compared to those who went abroad solely to increase their later career options.

Solely on the basis of experience abroad, behavioral patterns of applicants during selection processes cannot be predicted. This is in line with the theory that individual characteristics are more affected by genetic predisposition than by certain experiences. However, it might be assumed that experiencing more and versatile life events makes it more likely that someone develops strongly over a certain time but the ability to use given opportunities depends on the general ability to learn and to solve problems, which we would define as general intelligence (Tracy-Ventura et al. 2016). This is in line with the results of Holtbrügge and Engelhard (2016) that those who pay more attention on intercultural experiences and on increasing their ability to interact with other cultures will gain more competence over a certain period of time. Especially regarding occupational settings and stress management, this reveals directions for future research. Special attention should be given to social and individual aspects which mediate a potential relationship between experience abroad and gains in occupational competences in order to derive indicators for standardized staff selection processes and biographical questions.

5.1 Limitations

In this study, the constructs of subjective meaning of work, endeavor for perfection, expenditure willingness, ease of mind and even temper, resignation tendency, stability, discipline, social competence, and cooperation willingness were not significantly different between participants with versus without an experience of a stay abroad. There is neither a relationship between language proficiency in the host country's language and cultural intelligence, nor between the quantity of contact to locals and cultural intelligence.

The study design shows weaknesses, especially regarding the distribution of gender within the sample and the high educational level of the participants, which limits the external validity of the given results. Moreover, it is not clear in how far the given results are transferable to students who experienced an occupation-related stay abroad, e.g., an internship abroad. Van Mol (2017) shows in his analysis of employer preferences, that European companies are much more interested in international internships rather than in semesters abroad. However, little research has been conducted on the comparison of semesters abroad and internships abroad regarding the development of competences. Future studies should use the results of this and

other studies to compare individuals with educational and occupational stays abroad.

The participants with and without the experience of a stay abroad did not differ in their demographical characteristics, except in being engaged / married and having children. As it is likely that those who have kids are not less engaged than those who have not, we assume that this difference does not impair the comparability of students with and without the experience of staying abroad.

The study uses a cross-sectional design, which is not able to detect causal relationships, even though the research questions imply causality. However, there are several previous results of longitudinal studies that suggest a causal relationship between a stay abroad and changes in personality (e.g. Zimmermann and Neyer 2013; Wolff 2017). Further studies should use a pre- and post-test control group design to investigate causal relationships between stays abroad and the development of personality characteristics over time. This would also make it possible to exclude the possibility that students who go abroad were already more engaged when they decided to go abroad, rather than gaining engagement during their experience.

The study at hand did not control for confounding variables. Future studies should at least investigate the role of motivations to go abroad and the general intelligence in order to increase the studies informative value for practitioners and researchers. We further recommend to include prior experiences and intercultural circumstances of living as well as the housing situation as control variables into future analyses, to control for spurious correlations.

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Availability of data and material Corresponding data is available on request.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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