The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity

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ABSTRACT

The current research explores the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity. We conducted six studies ($N = 1,874$) using different populations (online panels and MBA students), mixed methods (correlational and experimental), and complementary measures of self-concept clarity (self-report and self-other congruence through 360-degree ratings). Our results indicate that living abroad leads to a clearer sense of self because it prompts self-discerning reflections on whether parts of their identity truly define who they are or merely reflect their cultural upbringing. Furthermore, it is the depth (the length of time lived abroad) rather than the breadth (the number of foreign countries lived in) of living abroad experiences that enhances self-concept clarity. Finally, our results highlight an important consequence of the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity: career decision-making clarity. Our research suggests that going far from home can lead one closer to the self, with implications for significant life decisions.

1. Introduction

"Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am… Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines… you are forced into direct experience [which] inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience."

Michael Crichton, *Travels*

Foreign experiences are increasingly common in the globalized world of the 21st century. Companies need to work across national borders and recruit foreign talent in order to stay competitive ("Competing Across Borders", 2012); educational institutions are admitting foreign students and opening campuses in different parts of the world in unprecedented numbers (Marklein, 2013; Schuetze, 2013); and interpersonal relationships are cutting across national boundaries more than ever before (Charsley, 2013). As the journalist Thomas Friedman famously noted, the world is becoming increasingly "flat" (Friedman, 2005).

Research is only starting to document the psychological ramifications of these foreign experiences. For instance, studies have shown that foreign experiences enhance creativity (Godart, Maddux, Shipilov, & Galinsky, 2015; Leung & Chiu, 2010; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Lu,

Martin, Usova, & Galinsky, in press; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009), reduce intergroup bias (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan, & Wang, 2012), and promote career success (Maddux, Bivolaru, Hafenbrack, Tadmor, & Galinsky, 2014; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Yet, many important questions remain unanswered. In particular, it is still unclear whether and how foreign experiences have an enduring effect on a person's sense of self. Although we know that foreign experiences can lead individuals to incorporate multiple cultural identities into the contents of their self-concept (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Saad, Damien, Benet-Martínez, Moons, & Robins, 2013), we know less about how these experiences affect the overarching structure of their self-concept. Thus, despite Michael Crichton's assertion that going abroad may elucidate our notions of who we are, research has yet to investigate the empirical foundations of this claim.

To address this question, we tested the idea that living abroad changes a key structural aspect of the self: self-concept clarity. This construct refers to the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept are "clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). Investigating the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity makes a number of contributions of both theoretical and practical value.

First, the current research enhances our understanding of the

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consequences of living abroad. Although there is an increasing interest in studying how living abroad influences people's sense of self, research so far has only explored the impact of foreign experiences on the *contents* of the self-concept—i.e., the person's specific cultural identities (e.g., Chirkov, 2009; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ward, 2001). The present work is the first to investigate how foreign experiences can also change the *structure* of the self-concept. Furthermore, whereas the bulk of research on foreign experiences has focused on whether participants have lived abroad or not, we take a more nuanced approach that distinguishes between the depth and the breadth of these experiences (see also Cao, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2014; Godart et al., 2015; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017).

Pursuing this research question also enriches our understanding of the nature of the self-concept. Structural aspects of the self, such as self-concept clarity, have been conceptualized as relatively stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996; Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010). However, if self-concept clarity is indeed affected by personal experiences like living abroad, this finding would align with recent studies suggesting that the structure of people's self-concepts is flexible (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Moreover, these recent studies have found that transitional experiences, such as job changes or romantic breakups, typically *decrease* self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter et al., 2010). In contrast, we examine the provocative possibility that living abroad is a rare kind of transitional experience that may actually *increase* self-concept clarity.

Understanding the impact of living abroad on self-concept clarity also has important applied implications. Because self-concept clarity has been linked to numerous positive outcomes, including psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), the ability to cope with stress (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011), and job performance (Earl & Bright, 2007), understanding if living abroad can lead to a clearer sense of self has direct practical value. Furthermore, we measure self-concept clarity not only through self-reports, but also through self-other agreement using a 360-degree rating system. These multi-rater systems have become highly prevalent in the corporate world, with some estimates indicating that around 90% of large organizations use them (ETS, 2012). Importantly, research has shown that poor self-other rating agreement can lead to a range of negative job-related outcomes (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009). It is therefore critical to identify potential factors—such as living abroad—that can lead to higher levels of congruence between self-ratings and other-ratings. Finally, our research explores an important consequence of the enhanced self-concept clarity that individuals gain from living abroad—career decision-making clarity, which has become a central topic in vocational psychology (e.g., Blustein, 2008; Santos, Ferreira, & Gonçalves, 2014).

2. Self-concept change: content versus structure

The self-concept has long been conceptualized as a complex cognitive structure that is fluid, malleable, and dynamic, as it can experience both short-term, temporary change as well as long-term, lasting transformations (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). The latter type of change especially has received sustained research attention for several decades. Scholars across a variety of sub-disciplines in psychology and organizational behavior have examined how people's sense of who they are can undergo major revisions. Adult development researchers, for instance, investigate crucial periods of transition, such as the transition from youth to adulthood (Arnett 2001; Bynner 2005; Molgat 2007) or the transition to parenthood (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012). As another example, a large body of research examines the changes in the self-concept that follow trauma such as illness, accidents, or bereavement; these studies largely focus on whether such negative events can lead to positive changes in one's sense of self, a phenomenon referred to as post-traumatic growth (Neimeyer, 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Finally, organizational researchers are interested in the self-concept changes

that accompany career transitions, from entering into a new role, to receiving a promotion, changing careers, being laid off, or retiring (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999; Strauss, 1977; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

A key distinction in research on the self-concept is that between its *contents* (i.e., self-representations) and its *structure* (i.e., the way these self-representations are organized and a person's meta-perceptions about this organization) (Campbell et al., 1996; McConnell & Strain, 2007). Studies on self-concept change such as those reviewed above tend to focus on changes in the contents of the self-concept rather than its overall structure. In other words, most studies have examined changes in specific components of the self-concept such as losing an identity (e.g., bereavement, job loss), adding a new identity (e.g., marriage, parenthood), or changing the contents of a specific identity (e.g., career change, immigration). Consequently, although this research provides a robust understanding of how the various elements of the self-concept can change, it cannot explain whether and how overall structural characteristics of the self-concept—such as self-concept clarity—can also change.

3. Living abroad and self-concept change

One stream of research on self-concept change is the work on the consequences of living abroad. Many scholars have converged on the idea that "hitting the road has substantial effects on who we are" (Zimmerman & Neyer, 2013, p. 527). Understanding how multicultural experiences affect changes in the self-concept has been recognized as essential to understanding the experiences of expatriates (Kohonen, 2004; Osland 2000), biculturals (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), immigrants (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fuligni & Tsai, 2015), and students enrolled in study abroad programs (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Elwood, 2011; Zimmerman & Neyer, 2013).

Just like studies on self-concept change in general, however, studies that specifically look at the effects of living abroad on the self-concept have focused on changes to the contents rather than the structure of the self. In particular, if people go abroad, they may add self-representations such as "adventurous", "global cosmopolitan", or "culturally savvy" to their repertoire. The acculturation literature in particular has illuminated how expatriates manage the challenge of forging a new sense of self as they navigate the differences in norms, values, and beliefs between the home and host cultures (Chirkov, 2009; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney, 2003; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Ward, 2001). This work has focused on whether individuals hold on to their home culture identity, to their host culture identity, to neither, or to both (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Berry, 1997; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Thus, this literature has been primarily concerned with the contents of the self-concept, probing which self-representations a person maintains, adds, or drops when living abroad (e.g., "I live in China, but I really feel like an American", or "I feel like both an American and a Chinese").

Although an increasing amount of research has shed light on how living abroad changes the contents of the self-concept, we propose that living abroad may also change the *structure* of the self-concept. We focus on one such key structural aspect: self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-concept clarity is associated with a host of positive outcomes: It contributes to psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), psychological adjustment (Campbell, Assanand, & Paula, 2003), relationship satisfaction (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010), life satisfaction (Mittal, 2015), purpose in life (Błażek & Besta, 2012), adaptation to stress (Lee-Flynn et al., 2011), cooperative problem-solving in conflict situations (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Zapf, 2010; De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005), and job performance (Earl & Bright, 2007). Given the numerous benefits of self-concept clarity, it is all the more valuable to understand whether and how it can be cultivated.

Initially, self-concept clarity was conceptualized as a personality trait-like construct and, as such, it was considered relatively stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996; Mittal, 2015; Wu et al., 2010). However, recent work has shown that self-concept clarity may actually be malleable. In general, transitional and disruptive experiences such as getting divorced, losing a job, or leaving a religious organization have been shown to cause confusion and instability for the self (Bennett, 2010; Ruble & Seidman, 1996), and these kinds of experiences can therefore cause a decrease in self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter et al., 2010). In contrast, the current research explores the possibility that living abroad is a particular kind of transitional experience that can actually cause an increase in self-concept clarity.

4. Living abroad increases self-concept clarity through self-discerning reflections

Like other transitional experiences, going to a foreign country can be disruptive and unsettling. Unlike other transitional experiences, however, going abroad exposes people to an unfamiliar environment characterized by a novel and oftentimes vastly different set of cultural norms, values, and behaviors. This is important because one way in which people develop a clear sense of who they are is through self-perception processes: They make inferences about their traits, values, and beliefs based on the behaviors that they see themselves performing (Bem, 1972). This path to developing a clear sense of self can be obscured when only living in one's home country. As people grow up in their home culture, they learn what is consensually believed, which in turn influences how they think and behave. Thus, when people only stay in their home country, they have few opportunities to question and ascertain if the beliefs that drive their thoughts and behaviors are truly consistent with their own core values or simply follow from the shared beliefs of the culture they are embedded in (Zou et al., 2009).

In contrast, when living abroad, such opportunities for self-examination abound. As Osland (2000) notes, when living abroad, people's previously unquestioned cultural values and beliefs are "put to the test" and are either discarded or strengthened as a result. No longer immersed in the values and norms that they take for granted, people are frequently faced with new situations that prompt them to reflect on the dissimilar values and norms of the foreign culture. Such recurrent reflections may strengthen self-concept clarity because they make people more confident in what they actually believe and, ultimately, who they really are. Consider the example of a German employee who has always been punctual. While living in Germany, this punctuality may have been driven by personal values or cultural norms. When moving to a country where punctuality is not normative, this employee will be forced to contemplate, for the first time, whether punctuality is truly a self-defining trait, or a culturally-driven behavior that can easily be discarded. As a result, living abroad can help this employee unearth and confirm beliefs about the self that he or she may have contemplated at some level (e.g., "Being punctual is important to me" or "Being punctual is not important to me"), but was never forced to confront and confidently define. Repeatedly going through these kinds of *self-discerning reflections* (i.e., reflections on whether parts of their identity truly define who they are or merely reflect their cultural upbringing) may ultimately lead to a clearer sense of self. This process thus involves attributing perceptions about one's identity (e.g., traits, values, beliefs, etc.) to the self or to cultural norms based on changing the cultural context. It is therefore reminiscent of Kelley's ANOVA cube model of attribution, which involves attributing causes to a person, stimulus, or circumstance based on the covariation patterns of these factors (Kelley, 1967).

The critical role of self-discerning reflections has been alluded to in qualitative studies on living abroad. For example, Kohonen (2004) conducted an interview study with a sample of Finnish individuals who had recently returned from expatriate assignments. The interviews describe in vivid detail how living abroad implies not only leaving behind what is known, ordinary, and expected, but also questioning what is known, ordinary, and expected. These types of reflections can consequently create "a more crystallized understanding about the self" (Kohonen, 2004, p. 30). As one of the interviewees in this study explained, "it became clearer to me in terms of who I truly was and what I wanted from my life and future" (Kohonen, 2004, p. 35). Similarly, Osland (2000) interviewed recently repatriated American executives, and described what she termed an "identity value paradox": While they had to adapt to their new culture by embracing some of the local values and norms, this had not always weakened their own cultural values and identity but rather clarified and strengthened them. In other words, repatriates perceived that some of the values attached to their home cultural identity had become stronger as a result of exposure to another culture. As illustrated by one of the interviewees, "the American values that became stronger were my belief in individual freedom. I think I became much more of a patriot after being over there" (Osland, 2000, p. 234). These accounts provide rich illustrations of the idea that living abroad triggers self-discerning reflections in which people grapple with the cultural values and norms of their home and host cultures and decide which ones are truly part of their self-concept and which ones are not. Such reflections can ultimately enhance self-concept clarity. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Living abroad increases self-concept clarity.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of living abroad on self-concept clarity is mediated by self-discerning reflections.

5. The depth (but not the breadth) of living abroad experiences increases self-concept clarity

We also explored which specific aspects of living abroad experiences are particularly predictive of self-concept clarity. Recent research has begun to make a distinction between the breadth (e.g., the number of foreign countries lived in) and the depth (e.g., the length of time lived abroad) of foreign experiences. On the one hand, some studies suggest that broad but not deep foreign experiences foster generalized trust, or the general belief that human nature is benevolent, because the diversity of foreign experiences allows an individual to generalize trust across different cultural groups (Cao et al., 2014). Similarly, Lu, Quoidbach, et al. (2017) showed that broad rather than deep foreign experiences predict an individual's unethical intentions and behaviors. On the other hand, other studies suggest that depth rather than breadth is a critical driver of creativity. For example, in a study on the world's top fashion houses, the number of years fashion directors had worked abroad was a stronger predictor of the creativity of their firms' fashion lines than the number of foreign countries in which they had worked (Godart et al., 2015).

We propose that depth will likely be a stronger predictor of self-concept clarity than breadth. The longer people live abroad, the more self-discerning reflections they are likely to accumulate, and, as a result, the more likely they are to have a better understanding of themselves. Indeed, when people live abroad for extended periods of time, they have more opportunities and incentives to learn deeply about the host culture (Maddux, Adam, & Galinsky, 2010; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009) and to discern similarities and differences between the home and host cultures (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). Importantly, these opportunities can arise whether one lives in a single foreign country or multiple foreign countries for a significant amount of time. What is critical is that deep experiences trigger reflections on personal values, assumptions, and behaviors that would otherwise be taken for granted, which can ultimately lead to a clearer understanding of the self. By comparison, the breadth of foreign experiences is less likely to have an impact on self-concept clarity. It is the breaking away from the constraints of the home culture and repeatedly going through self-discerning reflections that influences self-concept clarity; whether these

experiences occur in a single foreign country or in multiple foreign countries should be less important. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. The depth but not the breadth of living abroad experiences increases self-concept clarity.

6. The depth (but not the breadth) of living abroad experiences increases career decision-making clarity through self-concept clarity

Finally, we also explored a practical, career-related outcome of the hypothesized increase in self-concept clarity following foreign experiences. As mentioned above, self-concept clarity has a host of benefits, including psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), adaptation to stress (Lee-Flynn et al., 2011), and job performance (Earl & Bright, 2007). Having a clear sense of self might also become increasingly important in today's complex vocational world because of its unprecedented range of available career options (Obodaru, 2012; Obodaru, 2017). Many people have great difficulty navigating this bewildering array of possibilities, especially in a context of global competition, technological advances, and less linear, hierarchical, and organization-centric career paths (Blustein, 2006; King, 2004; Lent & Brown, 2013; Littleton, Arthur, & Rousseau, 2000). This explains why career indecision, defined as an inability to make career-related choices (Kelly & Lee, 2002), has become one of the most vibrant and productive topics of research in vocational psychology (Blustein, 2008; Fabio, Palazzeschi, Asulin-Peretz, & Gati, 2013; Gati et al., 2011; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008; Santos et al., 2014). Studies estimate that the vast majority of people will experience difficulty in making important choices and decisions at some point in their careers (Lee, 2005; Patton & Creed, 2001; Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009).

It is therefore timely and vital to identify factors that might help people be clear and confident about their career choices, and we propose that living abroad might be one such factor. Having a sense of self that is clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable should lead to clarity about what types of career options would best fit one's strengths and fulfill one's values. Although often alluded to, the potential benefits of self-concept clarity for career decision-making have never been articulated or tested. Classic theorizing has conceptualized career decision-making as a gradual process of refining a person's understanding of the self and the world of work and then using that understanding to find a good match between the two (Holland, 1997; Parsons, 1909; Sampson, Lenz, Reardon, & Peterson, 1999). It is implicit in this argument that the clearer one's understanding of the self, the higher the likelihood of making effective career choices. Indeed, having relevant information about the self, such as one's skills, abilities, vocational interests, aspirations, and career goals, significantly reduces career indecision (Brown & Rector, 2008; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996; Saka et al., 2008). If such information about the self can counter career indecision, it stands to reason that people who have high self-concept clarity—i.e., people who are clear and confident about this information, who perceive it as coherent, and who are consistent about it over time—should be more decisive about their career paths.

We further argue that the depth but not the breadth of living abroad experiences will increase career decision-making clarity. First, our argument follows from Hypothesis 3, which stated that the depth rather than the breadth of living abroad experiences increases self-concept clarity, which can ultimately lead to more decisive career choices. Moreover, our argument aligns with studies showing that the depth rather than the breadth of work experience positively influences the ability to make effective career decisions. For example, Healy, O'Shea, and Crook (1985) found that the number of months employed predicted students' mature career attitudes, realistic career expectations, and effective career choices. Similarly, Earl and Bright (2003) found that the volume of work experience rather than the breadth of work experience

predicted career certainty and decisiveness. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. The depth but not the breadth of living abroad experiences increases career decision-making clarity, and this effect is mediated by self-concept clarity.

7. Overview of studies

We tested our hypotheses across six studies. For all studies, we determined sample sizes in advance by taking into account prior similar studies in the literature as well as cohort sizes for the student samples in Studies 4, 5, and 6. Study 1 involved a survey exploring whether individuals who had lived abroad reported higher self-concept clarity than individuals who had not lived abroad. Study 2 compared the self-concept clarity of individuals who had lived abroad to the self-concept clarity of individuals who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet. In addition, Study 2 examined the mediating role of self-discerning reflections. Study 3 used an experimental design to test the causal relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity, and again investigated the mediating role of self-discerning reflections. Study 4 involved a survey that compared the effects of the depth versus the breadth of living abroad experiences on self-concept clarity. Study 5 went beyond self-reports and assessed the effects of deep and broad foreign living experiences on self-concept clarity using a 360-degree rating system that tested the congruence between self-evaluations of participants and others' evaluations of them. Finally, Study 6 tested whether deep and broad living abroad experiences predicted clearer career-decision making due to an increase in self-concept clarity.

8. Study 1: Living abroad predicts self-concept clarity

Study 1 provided an initial test of whether living abroad is associated with greater self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 1).

8.1. Participants

We recruited 296 participants (36.8% female; $M_{age} = 32.88$, $SD = 12.34$) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform that allows users to outsource "Human Intelligence Tasks" (HITs) to a large and diverse participant pool. It has been shown to be a reliable source of data for social science research in general (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), and it has been used successfully as a subject pool for studying the effects of living abroad in particular (Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017). All of our participants were located in the United States and needed to have a 98% approval rate for their previous HITs to participate in the study. Coincidentally, exactly half of them (148) had lived abroad, whereas the remaining half had never lived abroad.

8.2. Measures

8.2.1. Self-concept clarity

We measured *self-concept clarity* by using Campbell et al.'s (1996) 12-item Self-Concept Clarity Scale. Sample items included "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am", "Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I'm really like" (reverse-coded), and "I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality" (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = 0.91$). We coded responses such that a higher score indicated a higher level of self-concept clarity.

8.2.2. Living abroad experiences

At the end of the survey, participants indicated whether or not they had lived abroad.

8.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants who had lived abroad reported greater self-concept clarity ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.78$) compared to participants who had not lived abroad ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.87$), t(295) = 2.54, $p = .01$, $d = 0.29$. Controlling for age and gender yielded the same significant result, t(293) = 2.55, $p = .01$. Thus, Study 1 provided initial support for the idea that living abroad is associated with enhanced self-concept clarity.

9. Study 2: Living abroad predicts self-concept clarity through self-discerning reflections

The purpose of Study 2 was twofold. First, we sought to provide more robust evidence for the impact of living abroad on self-concept clarity. It is possible that people who already have a clear sense of self are more likely to pursue living abroad opportunities. To attenuate concerns about reverse causality and control for the type of person who is drawn to living abroad, we compared the self-concept clarity of individuals who had lived abroad with the self-concept clarity of individuals who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet. We also controlled for a greater number of variables beyond age and gender, including a variety of demographic and personality measures. The second goal of the study was to examine whether self-discerning reflections mediated the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 2).

9.1. Participants

We employed the Qualtrics Research Services Team to recruit 261 participants (24.1% female; $M_{age} = 30.13$, $SD = 8.35$). The Qualtrics team has agreements with multiple panel providers that offer access to a large and diverse set of potential survey respondents. Importantly, it is able to target specific samples through pertinent prescreening questions. These questions are embedded among other questions so participants are not aware of the true purpose of the study and what it takes to qualify for it. In our study, 136 participants had lived abroad. The remaining participants had not lived abroad yet but had plans to live abroad and, on average, intended to leave their home country within 9.2 months.

9.2. Measures

9.2.1. Self-concept clarity

Participants completed the same measure of *self-concept clarity* as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.90$).

9.2.2. Self-discerning reflections

Participants also completed a measure that assessed *self-discerning reflections*. The measure consisted of five items: "I have determined whether my personality is defined by who I truly am or by the culture I grew up in", "I have figured out if my relationships with others are driven by my own values or follow the values of those around me", "I do not know whether the way I play life roles (e.g., father, wife, employee) is influenced by what I believe or by societal expectations" (reverse-coded), "I have discerned which values I really care about in life as opposed to taking these values for granted because I grew up with them", and "I have come to understand which beliefs and assumptions about life define who I am and which ones are just the result of my cultural upbringing" (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = 0.73$). A factor analysis confirmed that these items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.51 (i.e., greater than 1), which explained 50.13% of the total variance; also, all items loaded positively on that factor, with all factor loading *ls* > 0.48.

9.2.3. Living abroad experiences

Participants indicated whether or not they had *lived abroad*. They also indicated if they had plans to live abroad in the foreseeable future, and, if so, when they intended to start living abroad.

9.2.4. Controls

At the end of the survey, we also included several *control* variables. Specifically, we measured demographic and personality variables that might influence an individual's self-concept clarity: age, gender, whether the participant was born in the U.S., marital status, self-monitoring (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995), the Big Five personality traits (i.e., agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), and factors that assess socioeconomic status (i.e., education, employment status, career advancement, and household income).

9.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1 and the results of Study 1, participants who had already lived abroad reported greater self-concept clarity compared to participants who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet—whether alone (Table 1, Model 1: $\beta = 0.20$, $B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .001$) or in the full model that included the control variables (Table 1, Model 2: $\beta = 0.15$, $B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .039$).

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants who had lived abroad reported greater self-discerning reflections compared to participants who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet—whether alone (Table 2, Model 1: $\beta = 0.21$, $B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$) or in the full model that included the control variables (Table 2, Model 2: $\beta = 0.21$, $B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .002$).

We then conducted mediational analyses using both OLS regressions and bootstrapping procedures. As noted above, having lived abroad predicted self-discerning reflections and self-concept clarity. Next, self-discerning reflections predicted self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.37$, $B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$). Finally, when entered into a simultaneous OLS regression, the effect of self-discerning reflections remained almost the same (Table 1, Model 3: $\beta = 0.34$, $B = 0.37$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), whereas the effect of having lived abroad was reduced (Table 1, Model 3: $\beta = 0.12$, $B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .037$). This mediation result also held in the full model that included the control variables (Table 1, Model 4). A bootstrapping analysis (Hayes, 2013) confirmed that self-discerning reflections mediated the effect of having lived abroad on self-concept clarity ($b = 0.111$; 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [0.04, 0.23]; i.e., it did not include zero).

We also used a bootstrapping analysis to test the alternative model that self-concept clarity mediated the effect of having lived abroad on self-discerning reflections. The indirect effect in this alternative model was significant, but weaker than the effect in our original model ($b = 0.068$; 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [0.01, 0.16]).

Thus, Study 2 provided robust support for the idea that living abroad has an impact on self-concept clarity. Specifically, people who had lived abroad reported greater self-concept clarity than people who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet, even when controlling for a range of demographic and personality variables. Results also provided empirical support for the role of self-discerning reflections in explaining this effect.

10. Study 3: Reflecting on living abroad predicts self-concept clarity through self-discerning reflections

The purpose of Study 3 was twofold. First, we sought to provide causal evidence for the effect of living abroad on self-concept clarity using an experimental design. Specifically, we recruited participants

Table 1
OLS regression analyses on self-concept clarity, Study 2.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Key predictors								
Having lived abroad (1 = yes, 0 = no)	.34**	(.11)	.26*	(.12)	.22*	(.10)	.14	(.12)
Self-discerning reflections					.37***	(.06)	.36***	(.07)
Control variables								
Age (years)			.00	(.01)			.00	(.01)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)			.16	(.13)			.12	(.12)
U.S. born			.19	(.15)			.18	(.15)
Marital status			.03	(.03)			.02	(.03)
Self-monitoring			.05	(.10)			−.12	(.11)
Preference for consistency			.03	(.04)			.01	(.04)
Openness to experience			−.05	(.08)			.02	(.08)
Conscientiousness			.17*	(.08)			.14†	(.08)
Extraversion			.05	(.06)			.06	(.05)
Agreeableness			.09	(.08)			.06	(.08)
Neuroticism			−.20**	(.06)			−.19*	(.06)
Education			.01	(.04)			.01	(.03)
Employed (1 = yes, 0 = no)			.06	(.13)			-.02	(.13)
Career advancement			.02	(.04)			.03	(.04)
Household income			−.03	(.02)			−.02	(.02)
Constant	2.66***	(.17)	2.36**	(.83)	1.46***	(.26)	1.50†	(.81)
R^2	.04		.19		.15		.27	
Overall F	10.33**		3.57***		22.77***		5.21***	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 2
OLS regression analyses on self-discerning reflections, Study 2.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
Key predictors				
Having lived abroad (1 = yes, 0 = no)	.34***	(.10)	.33**	(.11)
Control variables				
Age (years)			−.01	(.01)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)			.12	(.11)
U.S. born			.01	(.13)
Marital status			.02	(.03)
Self-monitoring			.45***	(.09)
Preference for consistency			.06†	(.03)
Openness to experience			−.21**	(.07)
Conscientiousness			.10	(.07)
Extraversion			−.03	(.05)
Agreeableness			.08	(.07)
Neuroticism			−.03	(.05)
Education			.03	(.03)
Employed (1 = yes, 0 = no)			.22†	(.12)
Career advancement			−.03	(.03)
Household income			−.02	(.02)
Constant	3.21***	(.16)	2.40**	(.72)
R^2	.05		.27	
Overall F	12.30***		5.76***	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

who had lived abroad previously. We cognitively activated their experience of living abroad versus living in the home country, and then assessed the subsequent level of self-concept clarity. According to the dynamic constructivist approach for culture and cognition (Hong, Ip, Chiu, Morris, & Menon, 2001; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000), when both foreign and domestic experiences are cognitively available to a person, their relative accessibility determines which type of experience will have a larger impact on subsequent thoughts and

actions. This methodological approach is well established and has been used to demonstrate the causal link between foreign experiences and various outcomes, such as creativity and trust (Cao et al., 2014; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Maddux et al., 2010). For example, when individuals who had previously lived abroad were asked to recall and write about either an experience of living abroad or an experience of living in their home country, the former group temporarily exhibited higher creativity than the latter group (Maddux & Galinsky, 2009, Study 3). The second goal of the study was to provide further evidence for the mediating role of self-discerning reflections, but in an experimental rather than a correlational paradigm.

10.1. Participants

We recruited 120 participants from MTurk, with the criterion for participation being that they had previously lived abroad. As in Study 1, all participants were located in the United States and needed to have a 98% approval rate to participate in the study. We excluded four participants because they had not lived abroad and/or did not follow the instructions for the experimental manipulation (i.e., they copied and pasted the instructions into the essay box instead of writing an essay themselves), yielding a total of 116 participants (48.3% female; $M_{age} = 34.24$, $SD = 11.09$).

10.2. Experimental manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the *living-abroad condition*, participants were asked to reflect on an experience of living abroad and to describe this experience in detail, writing about what happened, what they saw, and what they did. In the *living-at-home condition*, participants were asked to reflect on an experience of living in their home country and to describe this experience in detail, writing about what happened, what they saw, and what they did (see also Cao et al., 2014; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Maddux et al.,

2010).

10.3. Measures

10.3.1. Self-concept clarity

After the experimental manipulation, participants completed the same measure of *self-concept clarity* as in Studies 1 and 2 ($\alpha = 0.91$).

10.3.2. Self-discerning reflections

Participants completed the same measure of *self-discerning reflections* as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.73$). Once again, a factor analysis confirmed that these items loaded on one factor: It yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.50 (i.e., greater than 1), which explained 49.96% of the total variance; also, all items loaded positively on that factor, with all factor loading $ls > 0.46$.

10.4. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1 and the results of Studies 1 and 2, participants who reflected on their living-abroad experiences reported greater self-concept clarity ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.84$) compared to participants who reflected on their living-at-home experiences ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.78$), $t(115) = 2.33$, $p = .021$, $d = 0.44$.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2 and the results of Study 2, participants in the living-abroad condition reported higher levels of self-discerning reflections ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.61$) than participants in the living-at-home condition ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(115) = 2.60$, $p = .010$, $d = 0.48$.

We then conducted mediational analyses using both OLS regressions and bootstrapping procedures. First, the experimental condition (i.e., writing about living abroad or living at home) predicted self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.21$, $B = 0.36$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .021$), and self-discerning reflections ($\beta = 0.24$, $B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .010$). Next, self-discerning reflections predicted self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.41$, $B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$). Finally, when entered into a simultaneous OLS regression, self-discerning reflections still predicted self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.38$, $B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$), whereas the experimental condition no longer did ($\beta = 0.12$, $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = .16$). A bootstrapping analysis (Hayes, 2013) confirmed that self-discerning reflections mediated the effect of living abroad on self-concept clarity ($b = 0.154$; 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [0.03, 0.35]).

We also used a bootstrapping analysis to test the alternative model that self-concept clarity mediated the effect of the experimental condition on self-discerning reflections. The indirect effect in this alternative model was significant, but weaker than the effect in our original model ($b = 0.111$; 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [0.02, 0.27]).

Thus, Study 3 provided further support for the idea that living abroad is associated with enhanced self-concept clarity. Specifically, the study provided causal evidence for the effect of living abroad on self-concept clarity by experimentally activating living abroad experiences. It also provided further support for the role of self-discerning reflections in explaining this effect through mediational analyses in an experimental paradigm, which complements the correlational paradigm used in Study 2.

11. Study 4: The depth (but not the breadth) of living abroad experiences predicts self-concept clarity

Study 4 aimed to extend the findings of Studies 1, 2, and 3 in several ways. First, it sought to replicate the effect of living abroad experiences on self-concept clarity with a larger sample of participants. Second, Study 4 ascertained whether the findings of Studies 1, 2, and 3 are generalizable to individuals with considerable living abroad experiences. To do so, Study 4 recruited students from a top international

MBA program, the majority of whom had spent significant time living abroad in at least one foreign country. Third and relatedly, this sample allowed us to analyze which specific aspect of living abroad experiences—depth or breadth—was conducive to self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 3).

11.1. Participants

A cohort of 564 first-year students from a top international MBA program located in the Eastern United States participated in the study. We excluded five participants who attempted the survey more than once, yielding a total of 559 participants (36.9% female; $M_{age} = 27.72$, $SD = 2.33$). In this culturally diverse sample, 42.2% were born outside the United States in 53 different countries.

11.2. Measures

11.2.1. Self-concept clarity

In line with Studies 1, 2, and 3, we measured *self-concept clarity* with three items from Campbell et al.'s (1996) Self-Concept Clarity Scale. We reduced the number of items because of participants' time constraints and chose the following three items to reflect the three defining elements of self-concept clarity (i.e., being clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable): "I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am"; "My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another"; "My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently" (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = 0.70$). We reverse coded each item, such that a higher score indicated a higher level of self-concept clarity.

11.2.2. Depth and breadth of living abroad experiences

As a measure of the *depth of living abroad experiences*, participants reported the total number of months they had lived abroad (converted into "years", $M = 3.31$, $SD = 5.08$). As a measure of the *breadth of living abroad experiences*, they reported the number of foreign countries they had lived in ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 3.86$). The majority of the participants (80.9%) had resided in at least one foreign country. These measures of depth and breadth follow from prior research (Cao et al., 2014; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017).

11.2.3. Controls

At the end of the survey, we also included several *control* variables. Specifically, we measured age, gender, whether a participant was born in the U.S., and the Big Five personality traits (Gosling et al., 2003).

11.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the depth of living abroad experiences positively predicted self-concept clarity—whether alone (Table 3, Model 1: $\beta = 0.10$, $B = 0.018$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = .01$) or in the full model that included breadth and the control variables (Table 3, Model 3: $\beta = 0.11$, $B = 0.019$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = .01$). In contrast, the breadth of living abroad experiences did not predict self-concept clarity—whether alone (Table 3, Model 2: $\beta = 0.01$, $B = 0.002$, $SE = 0.010$, $p = .80$) or in the full model (Table 3, Model 3: $\beta = 0.01$, $B = 0.002$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = .79$). There was no significant quadratic relationship between (mean-centered) depth and self-concept clarity in the full model ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = .82$), nor between (mean-centered) breadth and self-concept clarity ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = .91$). The interaction term of (mean-centered) depth and (mean-centered) breadth was also not significant in the full model ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = .69$).

Overall, Study 4 extends the results from Studies 1, 2, and 3 by demonstrating that the depth—but not the breadth—of living abroad experiences positively predicts self-concept clarity.

Table 3
OLS regression analyses on self-concept clarity, Study 4.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Key predictors						
Depth (# years lived abroad)	.018[*]	(.007)			.019[*]	(.007)
Breadth (# countries lived abroad)			.002	(.010)	.002	(.009)
Control variables						
Age (years)					−.02	(.02)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)					−.01	(.08)
U.S. born					.10	(.08)
Openness to experience					−.004	(.03)
Conscientiousness					−.20[***]	(.03)
Extraversion					−.08[***]	(.02)
Agreeableness					.03	(.03)
Neuroticism					−.20[***]	(.03)
Constant	2.69[***]	(.05)	2.75[***]	(.04)	5.67[***]	(.51)
R^2	.01		.0001		.21	
Overall F	5.99[*]		.06		14.00[***]	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.
  [*] $p < .05$.
  [***] $p < .001$.

12. Study 5: The depth (but not the breadth) of living abroad experiences predicts congruence between self and other evaluations

The purpose of Study 5 was to test the robustness of the effect of deep versus broad living abroad experiences on a clear sense of self with a different measure of self-concept clarity. Instead of a self-report-based measure, we used a 360-degree rating system to assess the congruence between MBA students' self-ratings and ratings by both their classmates and coworkers. A high level of congruence would indicate that students view themselves in a similar way as others view them. Previous research has demonstrated a positive association between self-concept clarity and self-other agreement on a variety of dimensions, including personality traits, behaviors related to personality, and accuracy of predicted behaviors (Lewandowski & Nardone, 2012). Indeed, because "consistent *expression* of stable traits, abilities, attitudes, and other personal characteristics forms the foundation for defining and validating the real self" (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003, p. 934), individuals with a high level of self-concept clarity tend to behave consistently across different contexts. In other words, when individuals have a clear understanding of themselves, they are more likely to project a clear and consistent self-image to others. To be clear, this congruence-based measure serves as an indirect rather than a direct operationalization of self-concept clarity. Its main purpose was to provide convergent validity and complementary evidence for our previous findings and to attenuate common method biases associated with self-reports (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The measure also has important implications for practice given the prevalence of 360-degree rating systems and the finding that poor self-other rating agreement has negative effects on job-related outcomes (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009).

12.1. Participants

A different cohort of 551 first-year MBA students from the same business school as in Study 4 participated. We excluded seven participants who had incomplete data for any of the variables reported below, yielding a total of 544 participants (37.7% female; $M_{age} = 27.51$, $SD = 2.13$). Forty-two percent of this culturally diverse sample were born outside the United States in 52 different countries.

12.2. Measures

12.2.1. Self-concept clarity

As part of a core leadership course, participants rated themselves on ten important social dimensions: decision making, perceiving others, motivating self and others, influencing others, managing conflict, working in teams, listening, communicating, cooperation, and assertiveness. Each of the ten dimensions comprised five questions (e.g., "How much is this characteristic of your behavior?" 1 = "never", 7 = "always"). In addition to these ten dimensions, they completed the ten-item Big Five personality measure (Gosling et al., 2003), yielding a total of 60 questions.

Participants were also instructed to solicit feedback from four or more fellow classmates (with whom they had interacted for about a month) and from four or more individuals from a past or present work setting. These classmates and coworkers then rated the subject on the exact same 60 questions.

We measured self-concept clarity by computing the disagreement between self-ratings and other-ratings. For each subject, we used the following formula to calculate self-other disagreement:

$$\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{c=1}^{C} \sum_{q=1}^{60} (S_q - O_{q,c})^2}{\sum_{c=1}^{C} N_c}}$$

q: a question q
c: a coworker (or classmate) c
C: the total number of coworkers (or classmates) who rated the subject
S_q: the subject's self-rating for question q
$O_{q,c}$: coworker (or classmate) c's rating of the subject for question q
N_c: the total number of questions answered by *both* the subject and a coworker (or classmate) c

Consider a simplified example of a participant named Alex. For Q1 "I listen effectively to criticism and alternative points of view", Alex rated herself a 3 while her four coworkers rated her 3, 4, 2, and 2 respectively (i.e., "Alex listens effectively to criticism and alternative points of view"). For Q2 "I am willing to help when needed", Alex rated herself a 5 and the first three coworkers rated her 7, 1, and 3 respectively, but the last coworker did not respond to Q2.

In the *numerator* of the formula, for each coworker c, we compute the sum of the squares of the differences between Alex's self-rating S_q and the coworker's rating $O_{q,c}$ for both questions Q1 and Q2. That is, for Coworker #1: $(3–3)^2 + (5–7)^2 = 4$; for Coworker #2: $(3–4)^2 + (5–1)^2 = 17$; for Coworker #3: $(3–2)^2 + (5–3)^2 = 5$; for Coworker #4: $(3–2)^2 = 1$. Next, we sum across all four coworkers (i.e., $4 + 17 + 5 + 1 = 27$).

In the *denominator* of the formula, for each of the first three coworkers, the total number of questions answered by both Alex and a coworker is 2; since Coworker #4 only responded to Q1, this number is 1 for Coworker #4. Thus, there are $2 + 2 + 2 + 1 = 7$ comparisons in total.

Finally, we take the square root of the quotient of the numerator 27 and the denominator 7, yielding the self-other disagreement score of 1.964 for Alex.

For each participant, we computed (1) a self-coworker disagreement score, (2) a self-classmate disagreement score, and (3) an overall self-other disagreement score without distinguishing between coworkers and classmates. The smaller a self-other disagreement score is, the more convergent the self-evaluation and other-evaluations are, hence indicating a higher level of self-concept clarity.

12.2.2. Depth and breadth of living abroad experiences

As in Study 4, participants reported the *depth* (the number of months

Table 4
OLS regression analyses on self-other disagreement, Study 5.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Key predictors								
Depth (# years lived abroad)	−.008***	(.002)			−.008***	(.002)	−.006*	(.002)
Breadth (# countries lived abroad)			−.010†	(.005)	−.001	(.005)	.003	(.006)
Control variables								
Age (years)							−.004	(.004)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)							.001	(.022)
U.S. born							.015	(.021)
Openness to experience							−.035	(.022)
Conscientiousness							.051**	(.018)
Extraversion							.027*	(.011)
Agreeableness							.015	(.018)
Neuroticism							.038*	(.017)
Constant	2.64***	(.01)	2.63***	(.01)	2.64***	(.01)	2.18***	(.21)
R^2	.03		.01		.03		.08	
Overall F	18.91***		3.82†		9.45***		4.88***	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.
Note. A smaller self-other disagreement score indicates a higher level of self-concept clarity.
† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

they had lived abroad; converted into "years", $M = 2.86$, $SD = 4.55$) and the *breadth* (the number of foreign countries they had lived in; $M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.79$) of their living abroad experiences. The majority of the participants (77.2%) had resided in at least one foreign country.

12.2.3. Controls

At the end of the survey, we again included several *control* variables: age, gender, whether a participant was born in the U.S., and the Big Five personality traits (Gosling et al., 2003). For each participant, we averaged the self-rating and other-ratings on each of the five personality dimensions.

12.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 3 and the results of Study 4, depth alone significantly and negatively predicted the overall self-other disagreement score (Table 4, Model 1: $\beta = -0.18$, $B = -0.008$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$). Breadth also negatively predicted the overall self-other disagreement score (Table 4, Model 2: $\beta = -0.08$, $B = -0.010$, $SE = 0.005$, $p = .051$). However, when we included both into a simultaneous OLS regression, only depth remained significant (Table 4, Model 3: $\beta = -0.18$, $B = -0.008$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$), but breadth did not (Table 4, Model 3: $\beta = -0.01$, $B = -0.001$, $SE = 0.005$, $p = .89$). The effect of depth persisted (Table 4, Model 4: $\beta = -0.13$, $B = -0.006$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = .011$) when further accounting for the control variables. There was no significant quadratic relationship between (mean-centered) depth and the overall self-other disagreement score in the full model ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = .34$), nor between (mean-centered) breadth and the self-other disagreement score ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .61$). The interaction term of (mean-centered) depth and (mean-centered) breadth was also not significant in the full model ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = .33$).

The positive effect of depth on self-concept clarity replicated for the self-classmate disagreement score—whether alone ($\beta = -0.16$, $B = -0.007$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$) or in the full model ($\beta = -0.11$, $B = -0.005$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = .031$), as well as for the self-coworker disagreement score—whether alone ($\beta = -0.18$, $B = -0.010$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$) or in the full model ($\beta = -0.13$, $B = -0.007$, $SE = 0.003$, $p = .012$).

In sum, Study 5 demonstrated the robustness of our findings by using a 360-degree congruence-based rather than a self-report-based measure of self-concept clarity: The depth—but not the breadth—of living abroad experiences positively predicted a clearer sense of self.

13. Study 6: The depth (but not the breadth) of living abroad experiences predicts career decision-making clarity through self-concept clarity

The purpose of Study 6 was to further highlight the importance of studying the effects of living abroad on self-concept clarity by examining a key consequence of this relationship: career decision-making clarity (Hypothesis 4).

13.1. Participants

Ninety-eight international MBA students (38.8% female; $M_{age} = 28.89$, $SD = 1.93$) from a cross-cultural seminar (at the same business school as in Studies 4 and 5) participated in Study 6. This culturally diverse sample consisted of citizens of 37 non-U.S. countries.

13.2. Measures

13.2.1. Self-concept clarity

Participants completed the same measure of *self-concept clarity* as in Study 4 ($\alpha = 0.76$).

13.2.2. Career decision-making clarity

Participants answered the question "Are you clear about what you want to do with your career after the MBA program?" (from 1 = "not at all clear" to 5 = "very clear"). Past research has shown that deciding what to do with their careers after graduation is one of the most vexing and important challenges for MBA students (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2017).

13.2.3. Depth and breadth of living abroad experiences

Similar to Studies 4 and 5, participants reported the *depth* (i.e., the number of months they had lived abroad; converted into "years", $M = 5.56$, $SD = 5.27$) and the *breadth* (i.e., the number of foreign countries they had lived in; $M = 2.37$, $SD = 2.21$) of their living abroad experiences.

Table 5
OLS regression analyses on self-concept clarity, Study 6.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Key predictors						
Depth (# years lived abroad)	.04[*]	(.02)			.04[*]	(.02)
Breadth (# countries lived abroad)			−.01	(.04)	−.01	(.05)
Control variables						
Age (years)					−.07	(.05)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)					−.17	(.20)
U.S. considered "home"					−.90	(.55)
Openness to experience					−.17	(.17)
Conscientiousness					−.07	(.16)
Extraversion					.17	(.12)
Agreeableness					.12	(.17)
Neuroticism					.09	(.18)
Constant	2.51[***]	(.13)	2.74[***]	(.14)	3.88[†]	(2.17)
R^2	.05		.0003		.14	
Overall F	5.11[*]		.03		1.36	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.
[†] $p < .10$.
[*] $p < .05$.
[***] $p < .001$.

13.2.4. Controls

At the end of the survey, we again included several *control* variables: age, gender, whether participants considered the U.S. their "home", and the Big Five personality traits (Gosling et al., 2003).

13.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 3 and the results of Studies 4 and 5, the depth of foreign experiences positively predicted self-concept clarity—whether alone (Table 5, Model 1: $\beta = 0.23$, $B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .026$) or in the full model that included breadth and the control variables (Table 5, Model 3: $\beta = 0.25$, $B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .025$). In contrast, the breadth of foreign experiences did not predict self-concept clarity—whether alone (Table 5, Model 2: $\beta = -0.02$, $B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .88$) or in the full model (Table 5, Model 3: $\beta = -0.02$, $B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .85$).

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the depth of foreign experiences positively predicted career decision-making clarity—whether alone

(Table 6, Model 1: $\beta = 0.20$, $B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .044$) or in the full model that included breadth and the control variables (Table 6, Model 3: $\beta = 0.26$, $B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .021$). In contrast, the breadth of foreign experiences did not predict career decision-making clarity—whether alone (Table 6, Model 2: $\beta = -0.02$, $B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .87$) or in the full model (Table 6, Model 3: $\beta = -0.07$, $B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .54$).

We then conducted mediational analyses using both OLS regressions and bootstrapping procedures. As noted above, the depth of foreign experiences predicted self-concept clarity and career decision-making clarity. Next, self-concept clarity predicted career decision-making clarity ($\beta = 0.28$, $B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .005$). Finally, when entered into a simultaneous OLS regression, self-concept clarity still predicted career decision-making clarity (Table 6, Model 4: $\beta = 0.25$, $B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .014$), whereas the depth of foreign experiences no longer did (Table 6, Model 4: $\beta = 0.15$, $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .14$). This mediation result also held in the full model that included breadth and the control variables (Table 6, Model 5). A bootstrapping analysis (Hayes, 2013) confirmed that self-concept clarity mediated the effect of the depth of foreign experiences on career decision-making clarity ($b = 0.0110$; 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations: [0.0022, 0.0290]).

We also used a bootstrapping analysis to test the alternative model that the depth of foreign experiences mediated the effect of self-concept clarity on career decision-making clarity. The indirect effect in this alternative model was not significant (95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [−0.0056, 0.1474]). Finally, we also tested the alternative model that career decision-making clarity mediated the effect of the depth of foreign experiences on self-concept clarity. The indirect effect in this alternative model was again not significant (95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on 10,000 iterations = [−0.0002, 0.0160]).

Thus, Study 6 provided support for the idea that the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity has important consequences. The study not only replicated the finding that deep rather than broad living abroad experiences positively predicted self-concept clarity, but also showed that deep living abroad experiences positively predicted career decision-making clarity, and this effect was mediated by self-concept clarity.

Table 6
OLS regression analyses on career decision-making clarity, study 6.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Key predictors										
Depth (# years lived abroad)	.04[*]	(.02)			.05[*]	(.02)	.03	(.02)	.03	(.02)
Breadth (# countries lived abroad)			−.01	(.05)	−.03	(.05)			−.03	(.05)
Self-concept clarity							.28[*]	(.11)	.27[*]	(.12)
Control variables										
Age (years)					.03	(.06)			.04	(.06)
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)					−.52[*]	(.22)			−.48[*]	(.22)
U.S. considered "home"					−.94	(.61)			−.70	(.60)
Openness to experience					.06	(.18)			.11	(.18)
Conscientiousness					.02	(.17)			.04	(.17)
Extraversion					−.01	(.13)			−.06	(.13)
Agreeableness					−.17	(.18)			−.20	(.18)
Neuroticism					.26	(.20)			.24	(.20)
Constant	3.77[***]	(.15)	4.01[***]	(.16)	2.46	(2.40)	3.07[***]	(.32)	1.43	(2.39)
R^2	.04		.0003		.16		.10		.21	
Overall F	4.17[*]		.03		1.64		5.30[**]		2.04[*]	

Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.
[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.
[***] $p < .001$.

14. General discussion

Across six studies involving 1,874 participants, we provided consistent evidence that living abroad increases self-concept clarity. In Study 1, individuals who had lived abroad reported higher self-concept clarity than individuals who had not. In Study 2, individuals who had lived abroad reported higher self-concept clarity than individuals who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet. Study 2 also identified a mechanism underlying this effect: Living abroad increased self-concept clarity through self-discerning reflections on whether parts of their identity truly define who they are or merely reflect their cultural upbringing. In Study 3, we provided causal evidence: Among individuals who had all lived abroad, those who reflected on living abroad reported higher self-concept clarity than those who reflected on living at home, and this effect was again mediated by self-discerning reflections. In Study 4, the depth but not the breadth of living abroad experiences positively predicted self-concept clarity. Study 5 replicated this finding by using a self-other congruence measure of self-concept clarity, which attenuated common method biases associated with self-reports. This measure was comprehensive, encompassing ten core social dimensions as well as the Big Five personality dimensions. Moreover, the effect replicated across both self-classmate congruence and self-coworker congruence. Finally, Study 6 pointed to an important consequence of the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity: The depth but not the breadth of living abroad experiences positively predicted career decision-making clarity, and this effect was explained by enhanced self-concept clarity.

The fact that we found consistent support for our hypotheses across different subject populations (online panels and MBA students from many different countries), mixed methods (correlational and experimental), and complementary measures of self-concept clarity (self-report-based and congruence-based) highlights the robustness of the impact of living abroad on self-concept clarity. At the same time, we acknowledge the possibility that the effect could also go in the other direction and that a clear sense of self can predispose people to live abroad. We sought to attenuate concerns about reverse causality by comparing people who had lived abroad with people who had signed up to live abroad but had not done so yet in Study 2, and by experimentally activating the experience of living abroad in Study 3. However, the most stringent causal test of our arguments would entail randomly assigning people to live abroad or to remain in their home country and then measuring self-concept clarity.

The present research advances our understanding of the relationship between foreign experiences and changes in the structure of the self-concept. In doing so, it makes several important contributions. First, previous research on foreign experiences has largely focused on how living abroad changes the contents of the self-concept (e.g., Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Berry, 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997). The present research is the first to show that living abroad can change structural aspects of the self-concept as well. Here, we focused on one such key structural aspect: self-concept clarity. It is possible, however, that other structural aspects of the self-concept may also change as a result of living abroad. For example, another prominent structural feature is self-concept complexity, which denotes the extent to which a person has a multilayered self-concept consisting of many distinct aspects (Linville, 1987). It is possible that engaging in new and different behaviors while abroad may make individuals aware of the contextual nature of their actions and give them opportunities to uncover new and distinct aspects of the self, thus increasing self-concept complexity.

Another contribution to the literature on living abroad is that our research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the depth and the breadth of foreign experiences—a distinction that has only recently caught the attention of culture scholars (see Cao et al., 2014; Godart et al., 2015; Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017). Our findings indicate that a critical factor in the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity is the self-discerning reflections triggered by the

time spent away from home rather than the number of foreign countries lived in. Parsing out the different elements of foreign experiences thus offers a more nuanced understanding of their psychological consequences.

Furthermore, the current findings enhance our understanding of the flexible nature of the self. Self-concept clarity has generally been construed as a personality trait-like construct and has therefore been considered relatively stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996; Mittal, 2015; Wu et al., 2010). In line with recent work highlighting that the clarity of one's sense of self typically decreases in response to transitional and disruptive experiences (Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter et al., 2010), our results show that self-concept clarity may indeed be more malleable than previously thought. In contrast with this recent work, however, our results indicate that living abroad is a particular kind of transitional experience that increases rather than decreases self-concept clarity. There are at least two potential factors that make living abroad different from other types of transitions: First, living abroad is a qualitatively different kind of experience that involves exposure to a new culture and associated norms, values, and behaviors. As such, it is more likely than other types of transitions (e.g., getting divorced, losing a job, etc.) to trigger self-discerning reflections, which ultimately lead to a clearer sense of self.

Second, although stressful transitions *typically* undermine a clear sense of self, some studies suggest that their effect depends on the valence of the emotions accompanying the experience. For example, Slotter and Walsh (2017) found that self-concept clarity decreases when people evaluate a role change as primarily negative, but not when people evaluate a role change as primarily positive. Consistent with this finding, Light and Visser (2013) examined 17 types of role exits (e.g., getting divorced, losing one's job) which tend to be accompanied by negative emotions, and 15 types of role entries (e.g., getting married, having a baby) which tend to be accompanied by more ambivalent or positive emotions, and found that only role exits reduced self-concept clarity. McIntyre, Mattingly, Lewandowski, and Simpson (2014) went even further and showed that not even all role exits reduce self-concept clarity: Losing one's job decreased self-concept clarity only to the degree to which the individual perceived that job as highly important to their sense of self. In a similar vein, pursuing one's goals can be an effortful and stressful experience. Although failure to achieve one's goals can decrease self-concept clarity (Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2009; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), this effect only occurs when people see a specific goal as fused with their sense of self (Burkley, Curtis, Burkley, & Hatvany, 2015); achieving one's goals can actually increase self-concept clarity (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001). Likewise, students show an increase in self-concept clarity during their first semesters in college (e.g., Shin, Steger, & Henry, 2016; Slotter et al., 2010), a transitional experience that is undoubtedly stressful, but also likely perceived as positive, exciting, and growth-promoting.

In light of these findings, a key moderator of the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity may be whether the foreign experience is accompanied by positive or negative emotions. Early research on living abroad popularized the notion of "culture shock"—the "anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). However, the stress associated with living abroad is often framed in positive terms—a challenge, a worthy pursuit of self-growth, an adventure, an opportunity to learn new things, etc. (Adler, 1975; Adler, 1987; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Kim & Ruben, 1988). Many people make the deliberate decision to live abroad and presumably view this experience as a positive and exciting opportunity and potential pathway to a better life. Indirect evidence for the idea that living abroad is a primarily positive experience also comes from studies showing its positive impact on self-confidence, independence, open-mindedness, self-efficacy, intellectual development, and general well-being (Black & Duhon, 2006; Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; McKeown, 2009; Milstein, 2005; Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004).

Thus, a positive experience is likely to strengthen the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity, whereas a negative experience may weaken or even reverse it. Along similar lines, taking a more detailed look at other aspects of the actual experience of living abroad may reveal important insights. One open question concerns the dynamic nature of the relationship between different aspects of the self and how they unfold over time. For example, international experiences could turn cultural norms (something external to the self) into a value (something internal to the self). Similarly, although our research shows that self-discerning reflections play a key role in the link between living abroad and self-concept clarity, living abroad is likely to encompass other relevant experiences that involve self-discovery, self-revelation, and even self-creation. Investigations into these possibilities would provide a richer understanding of the processes that may shape the self-concept while living abroad and point to fruitful avenues for future research.

The finding that living abroad enhances not only self-report-based self-concept clarity, but also the congruence between how individuals see themselves and how others see them also extends the self-other rating agreement literature. Incongruence in self-other ratings, or "discrepant feedback", has been associated with several adverse consequences, such as negative affective reactions, reduced acceptance of evaluation procedures, and decreased motivation to participate in career planning (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Farh, Werbel, & Bedeian, 1988; Wohlers, Hall, & London, 1993). Given these negative effects, scholars have called for an investigation into factors that systematically influence self-other rating agreements (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009). Our research identifies a concrete experience that can reduce the discrepancy between self-ratings and other-ratings and associated repercussions.

By investigating the career-related consequences of the relationship between living abroad and self-concept clarity, we also contribute to research on career decision-making. In particular, career indecision has emerged as a central topic of study in vocational psychology. Studies have uncovered a number of factors that influence career indecision, including decision-making style (Mau, 2001), self-efficacy beliefs (Betz & Luzzo, 1996), negative affective disposition (Multon & Lapan, 1995), self-esteem (Wulff & Steitz, 1999), knowledge about possible occupations (Gati & Saka, 2001), and support from family and peers (Felsman & Blustein, 1999; Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999). We contribute not only to this important research stream by identifying another factor that can alleviate career indecision, but also to the literature on self-concept clarity by highlighting another beneficial outcome of having a clear sense of self.

Finally, understanding the processes of self-concept change that accompany living abroad experiences has direct implications for practitioners. For instance, foreign assignments are often seen as a key way of developing students, employees, and organizational leaders. However, we still know little about how such assignments impact a person's sense of self, which is why many scholars have called for more empirical research in this area (Kohonen 2004; Oddou, Mendenhall, & Ritchie, 2000). Moreover, many career counseling interventions focus on helping clients discover their vocational interests (Brown & Rector, 2008; Miller & Brown, 2005) and they do so by recommending "*a series of experiences* to encourage the clients' identity development and confidence building before engaging in career decision-making" (Saka et al., 2008, p. 420). Consistent with this recommendation, our findings suggest that living abroad experiences might be a valuable component in such interventions given their beneficial effects on self-concept clarity and, in turn, career decision-making clarity.

15. Conclusion

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. In this vein, our studies demonstrate that living abroad affects the fundamental structure of the self-concept by enhancing its clarity. Leaving one's home country for extended periods of time likely allows people to reap the numerous benefits that a clear sense of self provides, ranging from greater life satisfaction to decreased stress, improved job performance, and, as the current research indicates, enhanced career decision-making clarity. The German philosopher Hermann von Keyserling wrote in the epigraph to his 1919 book *Travel Diaries 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.

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