

Assessing the Study Abroad Experience

Intensity Factor Index

The Intensity Factors Index is a tool for evaluation the psychological intensity of intercultural environments for students based on this 10 cross-cultural stress factors.

Factors	Least Intense ←—————→ More Intense									
1. Cultural Differences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. Ethnocentrism	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. Language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. Cultural Immersion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. Cultural Isolation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6. Prior Intercultural Experience	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. Expectation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8. Visibility/Invisibility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9. Status	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10. Power and Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Overall Intensity	Score _____									

Source: R.M. Paige, A.D. Cohen, B. Kappler, J. C. Chi, and J.P. Lassegard (2006). *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Program Professionals' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*. Minneapolis, NM: Center for Advance Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.

Ten cross-cultural stress factors

These are some of the factors that will determine how much stress you will experience while you are abroad (Paige, et. al, 2006, p. 57).

1. Cultural differences

Psychological stress increases as the degree of cultural difference increases between the person's own culture and the host culture. Moreover, the more negatively the individual evaluates those cultural differences, the more stressful the intercultural experience will be.

2. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a stress factor that expresses itself in two ways. First, ethnocentric persons, particularly those in denial and defense, find intercultural experiences more threatening. Second, some cultural communities themselves are less accepting of outsiders. Students in those more ethnocentric cultures will find the experience to be more stressful.

3. Cultural Immersion

The more immersed the person is in another culture, the greater the amount of stress. "Culture fatigue" is a common problem for people who are deeply immersed in another culture –living and working with host culture persons and speaking a language other than their own.

4. Cultural Isolation

The stress of cultural immersion can be reduced by time spent with one's own culture group members. This allows for cultural reaffirmation and renewal; however, some persons can be isolated by geography and other circumstances from their own culture group.

5. Language

Persons unable to speak the language of the host culture will find the experience more stressful. Further, the more essential language ability is to functioning in the target culture, the greater the stress will be. The ability to speak the target language is not always essential, nor does it assure effective communication or intercultural adjustment. Lack of language skills, however, can lead to social isolation and frustration.

6. Prior Intercultural Experience

Stress is affected by the amount and nature of one's prior intercultural experience. In general, people with a limited intercultural background will experience more stress in a cross-cultural situation. Those with a great deal of previous intercultural experience will generally adapt more effectively because they have already developed effective learning and coping strategies, have realistic expectations, and possess strong intercultural communication skills.

7. Expectations

There are two major issues regarding expectation in intercultural work. First, people who have positive but unrealistic expectations about the new culture will feel a psychological letdown after a time. The culture just can't live up to those expectations. Second, people who have high expectations of themselves in terms of their ability to work effectively right away in the new culture will experience stress when they encounter normal cultural adjustment problems.

8. Visibility/Invisibility

Persons who are physically different from members of the host (or dominant) culture are highly visible and may become the object of curiosity, unwanted attention, or even discrimination. This can lead to considerable stress. Stresses can also occur when an important aspect of one's identity is invisible to members of the host culture (e.g., one's religion or political philosophy) or is concealed because it is not accepted in the host culture (e.g., sexual orientation). Concealing something about oneself for fear it could harm one's standing in the community or reduce one's effectiveness can cause considerable psychological stress.

9. Power Control

One of the most consistent research findings is that people in cultures other than their own feel a loss of power and control over events and people compared to what they possess at home. And the more power one is used to exercising, the more disturbing the loss. Their personal efficacy is diminished and they can feel that things are "out of control." The less the power and control the person has in the intercultural situation, the more psychologically stressful the experience will be.

10. Status

People who feel they are not getting the respect they deserve or, conversely, feel they are receiving unearned recognition will find the experience more psychologically intense. Qualities that are valuable in the home culture may not be important in the new one and can result in a loss of status. Alternatively, being granted status on the basis of inherited characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, religion, nationality, family background, and occupation) rather than personal achievements can result in discomfort.