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# Personality changes after the ‘year abroad’?

## A mixed-methods study

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This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to investigate personality changes of British undergraduate students who spent their third year abroad in a French or Spanish-speaking country. Personality changes were measured quantitatively using the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ, Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001), administered twice: pre-departure and after returning to their home university. A reflective interview was also conducted at the end of their stay abroad and analysed qualitatively to investigate whether students noted any personality changes. The MPQ results demonstrate statistically significant changes over time on the Emotional Stability factor only. These results are supported by the reflective interviews as 77% of participants mentioned feeling more confident and independent after residence abroad. Based on these findings, residence abroad appears to be an example of a type of social investment with the potential to positively affect the emotional stability of university students undertaking the experience as temporary sojourners.

**Keywords:** study abroad, personality, mixed-methods, longitudinal study, Multicultural Personality Questionnaire

### 1. Introduction

Residence abroad (RA) is considered by many to provide an optimal environment to learn a second/additional language (L2). Its superiority has been argued to lie in the availability of high amounts of exposure to authentic input in the target language (TL) available both in informal (out-of-class) and formal (classroom) settings (Magnan & Lafford, 2011). Additionally, RA has been claimed to be advantageous pertaining to meaningful interaction opportunities to communicate

with TL speakers in the host country. Such interactions have been found to be beneficial for linguistic and socio-pragmatic gains, as well as increased motivation, intercultural adaptation, cross-cultural awareness, and interpersonal communication skills in the TL (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Andersen Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004; Leong, 2007).

To date, most of the research on RA has focused on the linguistic, social, and communicative benefits. In comparison, far fewer studies have investigated the relationship between RA and sojourners' personal growth (e.g., Alred & Byram, 2002; Coleman & Chafer, 2011). To exemplify, little is known about the effects of RA on sojourners' personalities (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Although a number of studies from a cross-cultural perspective have discussed the ideal sojourner characteristics and personality traits for better adaptation and successful completion of the program (Bakalis & Joiner, 2004; Gu & Maley, 2008; Leong, 2007; Williams, 2005), RA as a way of social investment, model of acculturation, and life-changing event has received little attention. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating to what extent aspects of sojourners' personalities change after an academic year abroad, as measured by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001), and further analysed via a series of reflective interviews. The participants in this study were primarily Anglophone undergraduate students who were earning a French and/or Spanish degree at a research-intensive university in the United Kingdom. To meet degree requirements, as language majors they were required to spend their third year abroad in a French or Spanish-speaking country. Unlike more traditional 'study abroad' programs, students in the UK have a choice of placement type while abroad: as English teaching assistants, or other forms of work placement, or as Erasmus exchange students at a partner university (see also Meara, 1994; Mitchell, McManus, & Tracy-Ventura, 2015). Therefore, because not all of the participants spent their year studying at a partner university, in the current article we use the term 'residence abroad' as it is more inclusive and better exemplifies the experience of British students abroad (Coleman, 2002).

### 1.1 The benefits of residence abroad

The language learning outcomes of RA have been well documented in the second language acquisition (SLA) literature (see reviews by Collentine, 2009; DeKeyser, 2014; Kinginger, 2011; Llanes, 2011) and particularly for the British 'year abroad' (Coleman, 1996, 1997; Ife, 2000; Klapper & Rees, 2012; McManus & Mitchell, 2015; Meara, 1994; Mitchell, et al., 2015; Willis, Doble, Sankarayya, & Smithers, 1977). The RA research in general points to clear benefits in L2 domains such as overall proficiency (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004) and oral fluency (Du, 2013;

Mora & Valls-Ferrer, 2012), with less consistent results for areas such as grammar (Collentine, 2004; McManus & Mitchell, 2015) and writing (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009).

Empirical research has also explored non-linguistic benefits of RA. For example, studies have demonstrated positive changes in individual differences after residence abroad including foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate (Dewaele, Comanaru, & Faraco, 2015), as well as language learning motivation (Hernandez, 2010). The experience of living abroad has also been linked to increased Tolerance of Ambiguity (Dewaele & Wei, 2013), with stays longer than one year having more of an influence. From a cross-cultural perspective, one of the non-linguistic rewards of RA described in the literature is sojourners' personal development, in the areas of multicultural competence and intercultural sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2006; Leong, 2007; Williams, 2005). Mostly through survey-based quantitative methodologies, such studies explored how international education influences participants' personal standpoints towards cross-cultural issues, and how program characteristics (e.g., length of the program) and pre-departure training, including setting clear goals, would increase the benefits of RA experiences in the area of multicultural competence (Anderson et al., 2006; Dewaele, 2010; Dewaele et al., 2015; Leong, 2007; Williams, 2005). By the same token, Clarke, Flaherty, Wright and McMillen (2009) suggested that RA increases intercultural proficiency and openness to cultural diversity, resulting in more globally-minded individuals as compared to those who have not studied abroad.

Through qualitative studies, sojourners were also found to be more confident, resourceful, and autonomous learners concurrently reflecting more on their learning experience (Gu & Maley, 2008; Klapper & Rees, 2012). For example, Klapper and Rees' (2012) qualitative analysis of interviews with five students who made the most gains on two language tests and six students who made the least progress point to a potential positive relationship between language learning success during RA and emotional intelligence, which includes personal and social competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, adaptability, and stress management. Additionally, much qualitative research has focused on the role of identity and identity development during RA and how it influences sojourners' language learning and relationships with the host country (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Kinginger, 2015; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). As this research has shown, identity is more fluid, socially constructed and constrained, and contextually determined, whereas personality, the focus of the current study, is generally thought to be a stable construct.

## 1.2 RA and personality

Research on sojourner characteristics and personality traits have primarily focused on demonstrating the factors which predict participation in a study abroad program. For example, Bakalis and Joiner (2004) reported that Australian exchange students' personalities, higher levels of openness, and tolerance of ambiguity are statistically correlated with their participation in a RA program as compared to non-exchange students. Other studies have analysed the factors that predict success in adapting to a new cultural environment. Work by Gu and Maley (2008) highlighted the potential influence of students' personalities on their RA experiences through a mixed methods study. Chinese sojourners' age, degree of maturity, cultural background, motivation, attitudes, affective and cognitive traits, self-perceived language proficiency, former language learning experience, along with personality traits such as openness, strength, and positivity were all found to impact the degree to which they make the most of the RA program and interact with TL speakers in the host country. Results of this study also hinted at the possibility that aspects of sojourners' personalities could also change as a result of a year abroad. In particular, the Chinese participants reported to be more self-confident, independent, and active learners, seeking more interaction in and out of the classroom (Gu & Maley, 2008).

## 1.3 The debate on personality traits and change

A consensus seems to have been reached among psychologists regarding the structure of a personality taxonomy. They agree that personality traits are hierarchically organized with five broad, independent dimensions at the summit (Pervin & Cervone, 2013). These are known as the Big Five and include Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. Some of the most widely used personality instruments to measure the Big Five traits are the Goldberg International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) (Goldberg, 1999) and the NEO-FFI (McCrae & Costa, 1985). However, psychologists are divided on the process of personality change in young adulthood. Some advance a biological/genetic explanation, whereas others defend a focus on social/environmental factors (Roberts, Wood & Smith, 2005). The former approach asserts that the Big Five personality traits (McCrae, 2004) are not subject to complete alterations in all five traits. Yet, individuals have been found to become more agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable during the passage from adolescence to adulthood, which is also a genetically confirmed finding through the study of twins (Roberts et al., 2005; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Conversely, individual deviations from such trajectories have been documented in the research, thus contradicting the heritability of personality traits (Roberts et al., 2005).

This contradiction has been grounded in the Social Investment Principle (SIP, Roberts et al., 2005), which justifies adult personality change with “investing in social institutions, such as age-graded social roles as one of the driving mechanisms of personality development” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 173). Social investments (e.g., work, study, marriage, family, social roles) are found to relate to increased scores on personality measures of “social dominance, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability and to increases in these dimensions over time” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 174). Also referred to as life events in the literature, the SIP accounts for individual differences in personality development, which can be related to individuals’ “self-selection” of change rather than a biogenetic determinism (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). One example of a life event that has the potential to impact on personality development is residence abroad. Thus, in the current study we examine whether aspects of sojourners’ personalities change as a result of a nine-month stay abroad. In particular we investigate changes quantitatively using a reliable and valid personality questionnaire designed specifically for people living and working abroad, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001) described next. We then complement those results with a qualitative analysis of reflective interviews conducted with participants at the conclusion of their stay abroad.

#### 1.4 The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire

The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ, Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001) was developed to assess five traits that are key to individuals’ cultural adaptability and their psychological well-being in a foreign environment. It was developed as the need arose among cross-cultural psychologists to have a questionnaire that was more sensitive to contextual variables (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001). The authors felt that the standard Big Five inventories lacked measures “specifically tailored to grasp individual differences predictive of multicultural attitudes and multicultural success” (Leone, Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Perugini, & Ercolani, 2005, p. 1450). The MPQ was thus developed to measure personality traits which are related to different aspects of intercultural competencies. These five traits have “demonstrated incremental validity over broad personality measures such as the Big Five in predicting criteria such as students’ international orientation” (van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Ponterotto, & Fietzer, 2013, p. 118). Although the MPQ does not address issues related to second language learning, it addresses contact with a foreign culture, which is inherent to all foreign language learning, even more so in a RA situation.

The five dimensions in the MPQ are Cultural Empathy (CE), Openmindedness (O), Social Initiative (SI), Emotional Stability (ES), and Flexibility (F). CE is defined

as the ability to empathize with other cultural groups. O refers to having an open attitude toward different cultural groups and their values and norms. SI is defined as the ability to take initiative and be active in social situations. ES refers to one's ability to remain calm and handle difficult and stressful situations. Finally, F refers to the ability to tolerate the unknown and learn from new experiences. The MPQ has been statistically verified for construct and predictive validities with different samples (e.g., exchange students, expatriates, immigrants) from different cultural backgrounds (Leone et al., 2005; Leong, 2007) in multicultural settings. Also, MPQ dimensions were found to correlate highly with the Big Five dimensions (Leone et al., 2005),<sup>1</sup> which supports the success of the MPQ to grasp both the general personality trait factors, along with a focus on the effect of contextual differences and multicultural attitudes over one's personality. In SLA research the MPQ has been used more often than the non-specific, context-independent Big Five. For example, Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven (2009) and Dewaele and Stavans (2014) substantiated that some personality traits as measured by the MPQ are moulded by a number of linguistic, biographical, and social factors, such as the degree of multiculturalism. Multilingual London teenagers were found to score higher on O and CE, while scoring lower on ES as compared to monolinguals (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). Also, Israeli participants who reported knowing various languages well and using them regularly scored significantly higher on O and SI (but not lower on ES). The advanced knowledge of several languages was also linked to higher levels of CE (Dewaele & Stavans, 2014).

Leong (2007) was one of the first studies to examine longitudinal MPQ data gathered from two groups of undergraduate students from Singapore: one group that took part in an overseas exchange and another that stayed home. The purpose of this study was to explore the predictive ability of the MPQ for effective acculturation. The time between administration of the MPQ (along with the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale and Zung's Depression Scale) was three to four months. Results supported the use of the MPQ for predicting socio-psychological adaptation. The group who went abroad scored higher at pre-departure on four of the MPQ dimensions (O, SI, ES, and F), and their increased intercultural competencies predicted

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1. Leone et al. (2005) correlated the MPQ dimensions with the traditional Big Five dimensions and found that Cultural Empathy was positively linked to Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience. Open-mindedness was positively linked to Extraversion, Openness to Experience and negatively linked to Conscientiousness. Social Initiative was positively linked to Extraversion and Openness to Experience and negatively linked to Neuroticism. Emotional Stability was positively linked to Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness, and negatively linked to Neuroticism. Flexibility was positively linked to Extraversion and Openness to Experience, and negatively linked to Conscientiousness (p. 1457).

a reduction in socio-cultural and psychological difficulties. This study did not specifically investigate whether the five factors of the MPQ changed over the three to four month time period; however, the results presented suggest that they did not.

In a related study, Zimmermann and Neyer (2013) utilized the Big Five questionnaire and social relationships measures to investigate whether any of the five factors predicted students' decisions to study abroad, whether any changes in personality could be detected after study abroad, and whether differences in support relationships could help explain personality development. Two groups of university students were investigated: those who studied abroad either for short or long terms, and those who remained at home. Results of this large-scale quantitative study indicated that the RA participants' pre-departure levels of Extraversion and Conscientiousness predicted their choice of a short-term exchange, whereas Extraversion and Openness predicted long-term sojourning. Also, the RA participants were found to have increased their Openness and Agreeableness, along with a decrease in Neuroticism (most closely related to the ES dimension in the MPQ), after time abroad. Lastly, the RA participants self-selected social support relationships interacted with their personality change. These results suggest that RA is a kind of social investment that impacts on personality growth.

Large-scale quantitative studies such as Zimmerman and Neyer (2013) are important for generalizability; however, they lack insights from the participants' themselves. Having qualitative data to triangulate results from a questionnaire would add more credibility to the findings and bring in-depth understanding to such personal and context-sensitive phenomena (Ellis, 2008). Additionally, it would be worthwhile to examine whether similar results to Zimmerman and Neyer (2013) would be found if sojourners' personalities were measured using the MPQ considering the intercultural focus of RA.

### 1.5 Research questions

Based on the above review of the literature, the current study is motivated by the rich multicultural environment that RA offers and its potential to impact on sojourners' personalities. To build upon previous research, we adopt a mixed-methods approach, measuring personality quantitatively using the MPQ and complementing those results with qualitative data from a reflective interview conducted with participants at the completion of their year abroad. In particular, the current study investigates the following research questions:

1. To what extent do aspects of personality change after the 'year abroad' as measured by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire?
2. What evidence is there in the reflective interviews that students perceive changes in their personalities after the 'year abroad'?



## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Participants included 58 university students in the United Kingdom who were spending the third year of their French or Spanish bachelor's degree (four years total) living abroad. Although traditionally known as the 'year abroad', the students spend approximately nine months abroad (i.e., an academic year). They all came from the same university and were recruited as part of a larger longitudinal study of language learning during RA, the LANGSNAP project (see <https://langsnap.soton.ac.uk>). A total of 28 students spent the year in France of which 24 were native English speakers, 2 heritage French (+English) speakers, 1 native Finnish speaker, and 1 native Spanish speaker. The group studying Spanish was spread apart in three different countries: 18 students in Spain, 9 in Mexico, and 3 in Chile. In this group there were 26 native English speakers, 1 French/English bilingual, 2 Polish native speakers, and 1 heritage Spanish speaker. The mean age of all the participants at the start of data collection was 20 (range = 19–25), with 11 males and 47 females. All participants were monetarily compensated for their time as part of the larger research project.

### 2.2 Instruments

#### 2.2.1 *The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire*

The English version of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001) was administered. In total, the MPQ includes 91 items and consists of five factors: Cultural Empathy (18 items — e.g., 8. understands other people's feelings, 70. notices when someone is in trouble), Openmindedness (18 items — e.g., 35. finds other religions interesting, 62. gets involved in other cultures), Social Initiative (17 items — e.g., 25. takes the lead, 34. easily approaches other people), Emotional Stability (20 items — e.g., 36. considers problems solvable, 65. is self-confident), and Flexibility (18 items — e.g., 12. changes easily from one activity to another, 88. seeks challenges). For each item, participants select their answer on a 5-point scale: (1) *totally not applicable*, (2) *hardly applicable*, (3) *moderately applicable*, (4) *largely applicable*, and (5) *completely applicable*. A majority of the items are scored this way, except 32 items which are scored inversely. The validity and reliability of the MPQ has already been documented in a number of studies (Leone et al., 2005; Van Oudenhoven, Timmerman & Van der Zee, 2007). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .93, demonstrating high internal consistency. This statistic is used to gauge the reliability of the questionnaire.

### 2.2.2 Interviews

At the end of their stay abroad, 53/58 participants were interviewed in English as part of a reflective exercise. The interviewer asked a series of questions (see the Appendix for the list of questions) but was also free to ask follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. In these interviews participants were asked to think about their 'year abroad' as a whole and to reflect on such things as their learning of the target language, challenges they faced living abroad, their most memorable times, and whether they felt they had changed at all as a result of this experience. Responses to this final question related most to changes in personality. These interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes each, depending on how much information the participant wanted to share. The interviews were transcribed in CHAT (Codes for Human Analysis of Transcripts) (MacWhinney, 2000) and analysed paying particular attention to comments about changes in personality and potential reasons for any changes noted.

### 2.3 Procedure

All participants completed the first MPQ in September 2011, before starting their 'year abroad'. The questionnaires were made available online through an online survey program designed at the students' university. The order in which the items appeared on the questionnaire was randomized each time. A built-in personalized tool allowed us to track each student's progress. Using this tool, every participant was emailed a unique link and asked to complete the questionnaire at their earliest convenience. After a week had passed, those participants who still had not responded were sent a reminder email.

The reflective interviews were conducted in May 2012 at the end of participants' stay abroad. Every participant was visited in situ and interviewed by a member of the research team.

The MPQ was again administered a year after the first one in September 2012 when the participants had returned from their 'year abroad'. The same procedure was followed. Participants were emailed the link and asked to complete the questionnaire again as soon as possible. Some also received a reminder email a week later.

## 3. Results

Our first research question investigated to what extent aspects of personality change after RA as measured by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire. Results are displayed in Table 1. As a reminder, the highest score per item is five (*completely*

*applicable*). Therefore, the means show that even before going abroad these participants scored rather high on Cultural Empathy ( $x=3.97$ ), Openmindedness ( $x=3.72$ ), and Social Initiative ( $x=3.62$ ). Their lowest score before living abroad was on the Emotional Stability factor ( $x=2.93$ ). Comparing the pre- and post-residence abroad results, there appears to be little change except on the Emotional Stability factor. To test whether any of these changes were statistically significant, we conducted paired sample t-tests on each of the 5 factors.

**Table 1.** Results of paired-sample t-tests

Factors	Mean	SD	Significance	Cohen's d
Cultural Empathy 1	3.97	.36	n.s	
Cultural Empathy 2	3.95	.41		
Openmindedness 1	3.72	.36	n.s	
Openmindedness 2	3.73	.37		
Social Initiative 1	3.62	.48	n.s	
Social Initiative 2	3.60	.56		
Emotional Stability 1	2.93	.47	$t = -2.08$	-.30
Emotional Stability 2	3.00	.40	$p < .042$	
Flexibility 1	3.21	.49	n.s.	
Flexibility 2	3.23	.48		

As shown in Table 1, the only personality factor to change significantly was Emotional Stability,  $t=2.1$ ,  $p < .042$ . Their score on the MPQ administered after the 'year abroad' was higher, suggesting that students became more emotionally stable after their time abroad. The effect size (Cohen's d) was  $-.30$  demonstrating a medium effect according to Cohen (1988).

Our second research question investigated whether the students perceived changes in their personalities after the 'year abroad' as evidenced in comments made in a reflective interview conducted at the end of their stay abroad. A variety of questions were asked (see Appendix) and the last question focused particularly on whether they thought they had changed/grown as a person through the experience of living abroad and being immersed in another language. If they answered yes, then we asked them to explain in what ways. Of the 53 students interviewed, 41 of them (77%) talked about feeling more confident and independent after their year abroad. Many also mentioned feeling more confident in their abilities to deal with unknown and difficult situations now. For example, in the excerpt from Participant 115 below, she chose to highlight how having telephone conversations and conducting business transactions in a second language gave her more confidence in doing such things in her first language. Many students had to make

telephone calls when they first arrived and were looking for a place to live. They also had to open a bank account. Having just arrived, their French and Spanish abilities were not very advanced so many struggled through it. Yet, many students commented on how later they saw these experiences as empowering.

- (1) Participant 115: This really taught me that I can survive all by myself in a foreign country and coming back it's so much easier to deal with the things that previously I'd sort of shy away from, like difficult telephone conversations and like try to sort something out, like car insurance and banking, and all that sort of thing. I sort of think I managed to do it in French and all the time I was doing it in French I was thinking this would be so much easier if I could just explain it in English. So now every time I'm doing that sort of thing in English I'm thinking you can obviously do this now.

Participant 119 chose to highlight the importance of overcoming difficult situations and how that made her more confident. In her interview she talked about going through a difficult period in the middle of her stay but that getting through that made a huge difference in her last two months which she considered "the best." In her excerpt she reflects on her past, present, and future self from different perspectives to demonstrate this change.

- (2) Participant 119: I think I've learnt a lot of life skills from this year abroad, which at the time may have seemed like the worst thing in the world, but at the same time I now think have provided me with an amazing experience, euh and have made me see what I myself can achieve and has made me really excited for going to China and doing it all over again but with friends this time so that's good.

Participant 167 mentioned feeling both more confident and more independent after the experience of living abroad especially as it was the first time that she was not living with a family member and was completely responsible for herself.

- (3) Participant 167: I think I've learnt a huge amount from being here. I think it's a very important thing and I think my personality has changed quite a lot and I think I've definitely become more confident in my own knowledge, in my own knowledge that I am capable of living on my own, of surviving in a foreign country with nobody around. And nobody can take that away from me, if you see what I mean.

Nearly 38% of participants (20) also talked about feeling more relaxed in general about things, and less timid and nervous when meeting and talking to new people. For example, Participant 173 mentioned feeling not only more confident,

but happier and less stressed after living in Spain. In his excerpt he says multiple times that he is not sure why, yet in his interview he mentioned several times what a great year he had and how much he loved the culture which he saw as more laid back than Britain.

- (4) Participant 173: I think I am more confident. I think I talk a lot more. I don't know why... I sound more happy as well. I am happier. Yeah I don't know why euh. I'd say I've changed for the good. Not that I was a horrible person but I think I am much more happier and relaxed as well, much more relaxed about things. Like before I'd be more stressed about things. I know they will get done and it is fine. I don't have to worry about things like that.

Participant 100 also mentioned talking more and feeling more relaxed, but for him it had more to do with being pushed to interact with new people. In his excerpt he calls himself a shy person but explains how the experience of living in a very large city encouraged him to interact with more people than he normally would at home, in particular strangers who he said he had to interact with on a daily basis.

- (5) Participant 100: Maybe I'm a little less concerned about, you know, sort of getting to know people. I was always a bit more shy. I'm still quite a shy person anyway, yeah I don't know, but maybe just being in a huge city, you're not the only small fish in the sea. Cos there's so many people here anyway, it doesn't really, like xxx is absolutely huge in itself and Paris is massive. Euh but it's a tiny place for a lot of people. So yeah, I reckon that's probably the main thing. It sort of made me a little bit more perhaps conversational.

Participant 180 talks about how having to speak with many new people helped her to feel more brave. Similar to Participant 115 (excerpt 1), she highlights the role of a second language in this change, particularly thinking back to the beginning of her stay when it was difficult to express herself but she had to do it anyway.

- (6) Participant 180: I think it's made me a little bit more brave about doing things in general, because you will feel uncomfortable at the beginning when your language isn't that good and you have to speak to people and when you don't understand and then there is confusion and it is kind of awkward, but you just do it and get on with it.

These feelings which are overwhelmingly discussed in the interviews relate to the factor of Emotional Stability on the MPQ, the only factor that showed significant change after the 'year abroad'. Many of the questionnaire items from that factor relate specifically to confidence (e.g., 65. Is self-confident; 5. Is not easily hurt; 57. Forgets setbacks easily) and emotions (e.g., 3. Is nervous; 38. Is timid; 69. Worries — these items get inversely scored).

Occasionally, participants discussed other changes in their personalities that relate to different factors on the MPQ; however, these comments were quite infrequent compared to comments related to Emotional Stability. For example, when participant 105 was asked if she had changed or grown as a result of living abroad, she chose to highlight her increased interest in other cultures which is more characteristic of the Openmindedness factor. She was the only student to discuss this change she noticed in herself. In her excerpt she talks about how now after living abroad she is more proactive and eager to interact with people from different cultures who she sees as cultural informants from whom to learn. She contrasts this aspect of herself to her friends in the UK who have not lived abroad.

- (7) Participant 105: Definitely, without a doubt, it just made me so much interested in, I mean I've always been interested in other people and other cultures. But just noticing the difference, I just brought some of my friends to the UK to visit, like we went to London. And I introduced them to my friends here, and they got on fine. I just noticed how, if I was to meet someone new now, I'd be asking them so many questions, like where do you come from, what do you study. And my friends here yeah they were polite but they weren't very interested in learning about where they are from. Whereas now when I meet someone new I'm just so interested, because I know what it is like to go somewhere different, I don't know. It just opened up my mind.

Two participants (4%) made comments that were more in line with the Cultural Empathy factor. One explained how she became more tolerant of others, and the other how, by observing others' behaviours, she was able to reflect on her own. For example, Participant 166 describes how at the end of her stay abroad she is more aware of her own biases and reflects on cultural differences instead of simply reacting to them. In her interview she describes how a course she took at her home university on ethnography (before going abroad) taught her to analyse from different points of view. Being able to apply that new skill abroad helped her to become more tolerant of differences. In her excerpt she uses the example of smoking.

- (8) Participant 166: I'm definitely more tolerant. I notice this for example with my flatmates. Now all my flatmates have smoked and before in England I would be like gosh and make a big fuss. I wouldn't be near smokers at all because I didn't like it. But here I am like I don't know little things. I am more tolerant of and I tried to understand. I try not to get angry about things before I try to understand it and then make my judgment of it rather than get angry.

Participant 171 also mentioned becoming more reflective as a result of living in a different culture. For her, seeing other models and ways of being enabled her to see herself in a different way. The comments in her excerpt demonstrate how she is able to take both an emic and etic approach to understanding her own behaviour and personality.

- (9) Participant 171: I think you see how other people, because you're like an outsider, you can see how other people interact with their families. And you're like oh that's what I did, that's what I used to be like, and it kind of makes you understand how you were with your parents or the kind of student you were. And you think oh I was a bad student, that kind of thing.

When asked if they had changed or grown as a person after the experience of living abroad, two students (4%) said that they had not. In fact, both explain that they had already been through a similar experience of having lived abroad for an extended stay. Participant 116 makes the point that she sees the experience as mostly good for language learning.

- (10) Participant 116: I'm not too sure because I have done some stuff like this before, never for as long, but I've kind of lived away from home in different countries for a few months. And I don't think this has kind of impacted me anymore... I think it's just kind of good for my language.
- (11) Participant 175: I'd already been to another place and lived before. I went to Argentina and I lived for a few months, so I think I matured then more than I have done. I just think I stayed similar I think. I don't think much has changed now.

Comments such as these from Participants 116 and 175 highlight an interesting aspect of RA research that is rarely discussed. That is, the assumption that living abroad or being immersed in a different culture is a new experience when in fact for some students it is not (e.g., heritage language learners, Third Culture Kids, etc).

In sum, results from the MPQ and the interviews both suggest that the one personality factor that changed significantly after a 'year abroad' was Emotional Stability. The addition of the interview data provided a more detailed account, highlighting various factors — e.g., L2 use, overcoming difficult situations, living alone for the first time, and living in a large city — that were potential causes for change.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent aspects of university students' personalities change after spending an academic year abroad. The participants in this study were French and Spanish degree students from a UK university who were spending their third year of a four-year degree in either France, Spain, Mexico, or Chile. Results from the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001) administered before and after participants went abroad demonstrated a significant change on the Emotional Stability factor only, the lowest factor score at both times (2.93 and 3.00, respectively). Qualitative data from a reflective interview with the participants at the end of their stay abroad supported this result, as 77% of the participants mentioned feeling more confident and independent after their 'year abroad'. This finding confirms the results of Gu and Maley (2008) who through a more qualitative study found that Chinese sojourners in the UK reported feeling more confident, resourceful, and autonomous as a result of their RA experiences. An increase in Emotional Stability also relates to findings from Zimmerman and Neyer (2013) who used the Big Five questionnaire and found a decrease in the Neuroticism factor (most closely related to Emotional Stability) after RA. In contrast to the current study, however, they also found an increase in Openness and Agreeableness.

The fact that in the current study only one of the factors changed after RA could be due to our participants' initial high scores on three factors: Cultural Empathy ( $x=3.97$ ), Openmindedness ( $x=3.72$ ), and Social Initiative ( $x=3.62$ ). Considering that they were students majoring in foreign languages, it seems logical that they would already have high levels of Cultural Empathy and Openmindedness in particular. In fact, comparing the results of the current study with those of Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven (2009), our participants scored higher on the MPQ than their multilingual/multicultural participants (i.e., 'Third Culture Kids') on Cultural Empathy (4.0 vs. 3.5), Social Initiative (3.62 vs. 3.2), and Flexibility (3.2 vs. 2.8). Compared to the monolingual participants in their study, our participants scored higher on all factors except Emotional Stability (3.8 vs. 2.9). Possible explanations for these differences are the age of participants (young teenagers in Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009), the social background (lower), and the educational choices (students in the present study had obtained high scores at A-level and had consciously decided to specialize in languages at university). It is therefore not surprising that they had stronger multicultural inclinations. Another factor is that students who decide to study abroad tend to have unique personality profiles, typically leaning towards Openmindedness and Sociability (cf. Bakalis & Joiner, 2004).



The result that even one aspect of participants' personalities changed after RA lends support to the view that social investment is a driving force in personality development (Roberts et al., 2005) and that RA is an example of a life event with the potential to influence personality change. The fact that our participants were in their early twenties, at that transition stage to adulthood, could also support the possibility for personality development. Future research should be conducted with older participants, well into adulthood, who undertake some form of temporary RA to investigate whether similar results would be found. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to replicate this study with the addition of a control group that does not go abroad and a comparison group who goes abroad but to a country where the same language is spoken (e.g., Australia, Canada, the USA). Such a study would make it possible to investigate to what extent personality change might be attributed to second language use, as was noted in a number of the interview excerpts. The choice of the MPQ over the traditional Big Five questionnaire in the current study was justified because it fitted the situations in which the students found themselves. It is less likely that change could have been caught with a culturally neutral Big Five questionnaire. We also have to acknowledge the fact that a certain degree of bias is inevitable in the sense that our participants may have wanted to please the researchers in their self-reporting. However, this applies to all research on RA (see Kinginger, 2008).

In sum, results of the current study suggest that students' personalities remain mostly stable after a year abroad, but they become more emotionally stable as a result of the experience. Using a mixed-methods study, we were able to demonstrate that the findings from a questionnaire measured quantitatively were supported by qualitative data from interviews conducted with participants at the end of their stay. The most frequent change that the participants discussed in the interviews related to confidence, not just in the second language but in their lives in general. Therefore, results of this study suggest that RA is an example of a type of social investment that has the potential to positively affect the emotional stability of university students who are undertaking the experience as temporary sojourners.

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### **Appendix. Questions for the Reflective Interview (Time 3 abroad, in English)**

1. Now that you are at the end of your year abroad, how do you think the experience has influenced your learning of French/Spanish?
2. What experiences do you think have been the most beneficial in influencing your French/Spanish? (activities like reading or watching tv, friends, etc).
3. How do you think your French/Spanish compares now to when you first arrived in France/Spain/Mexico/Chile? What has changed?
4. Do you remember any particular learning experiences/opportunities? For example, times when people corrected you? Or having to do certain unfamiliar things in the language?
5. What kinds of frustrations did you encounter learning the language in France/Spain/Mexico/Chile (if any)?
6. What have been the best things about learning French/Spanish abroad, compared to learning it in the classroom?
7. What are the differences between learning in a classroom, compared to learning abroad?
8. If you got a chance to do it all over again, would you? Would you change anything about your year abroad?

9. What do you think has been the best thing about this experience? And the worst?
10. Do you think you've changed/grown as a person through this experience of living abroad and being immersed in another language? Why or why not?