THE U-CURVE ON TRIAL: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT DURING CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITION

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ABSTRACT. The research examined cross-cultural transition and adjustment of sojourners in a longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adaptation of Japanese students in New Zealand. Thirty-five newly arrived students completed questionnaires which monitored depression (psychological adjustment) and social difficulty (sociocultural adaptation) at four time periods: within 24 hours of arrival in the country and at 4, 6 and 12 months in New Zealand. Neither psychological nor sociocultural measurements of adaptation demonstrated the popular U-curve of adjustment. Contrary to the U-curve proposition and in line with our hypotheses, adjustment problems were greatest at entry point and decreased over time. The magnitudes of the correlations between psychological and sociocultural adjustment were also examined over the four time periods. As hypothesized, the relationship between the two adjustment indicators was insignificant at the first testing ($r = -0.05$); however, the magnitude significantly increased ($r = 0.36, p < 0.05$) after 12 months in New Zealand. The distinction between psychological and sociocultural adaptation, their relationship and variation over time and the importance of longitudinal research with sojourners are discussed. © 1998 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

KEY WORDS. Cross-cultural transition, adjustment, acculturation, adaptation, U-curve, Japanese

INTRODUCTION

Although substantial research has been amassed over the past decades on the experience of cross-cultural transition and the predictors of

The study was funded by a grant from the Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. The authors would like to thank the past Principal, D. H. Parker, the past Vice-Principal, N. N. Hanlon and the students at International Pacific College, Palmerston North, New Zealand, for their cooperation and support.

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sojourner adjustment, considerable controversy remains about the process of adapting to a new culture and the patterns of adjustment over time. The most popular and well-known stage theory of cross-cultural adaptation was originally advanced by Lysgaard (1955) in his study of Norwegian Fulbright scholars in the United States. Noting that the greatest adjustment difficulties were encountered by those sojourners who had resided abroad 6–12 months compared to either those who had been overseas less than 6 months or more than 18 months, Lysgaard (1955, p. 50) stated:

Adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a “crisis” in which one feels less well-adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community.

A similar account of cross-cultural adaptation was provided by Oberg (1960) in his anthropological description and elaboration of “culture shock.” Oberg (1960, p. 177) portrayed culture shock as an “occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad.” Although culture shock is commonly associated with negative psychological symptoms such as fear, anxiety, anger and feelings of helplessness, Oberg maintained that sojourners typically move through stages of culture shock and eventually achieve satisfactory adjustment. Accordingly, the experience of cross-cultural transition commences with a “honeymoon” stage of enthusiasm and fascination with a new cultural environment. This is followed first by a period of crisis, distress, hostility and withdrawal, secondly by a transition stage and finally by a period of adjustment, integration and enjoyment. Oberg’s stages of cross-cultural adaptation, like Lysgaard’s, can also be graphically represented by a U-curve.

For more than thirty years the U-curve has assumed a central position in theory and research on transition and adjustment. Investigators have borrowed the theorizing on sojourners’ psycho-emotional changes over time and applied the U-curve hypothesis to diverse forms of “adjustment” such as social interaction with hosts, attitudes, host culture perceptions, culture-specific knowledge, homesickness and even academic performance (Scott, 1956; Sewell & Davidsen, 1961; Davis, 1971; Chang, 1973; Torbiorn, 1982). Researchers have also extended the graphic representation of the “U-curve” to a “W curve” incorporating the re-entry phenomenon into the overall framework (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

The popularity of the model persists today even though the Lysgaard (1955) original theorizing was based on retrospective, cross-sectional data and the Oberg (1960) musings were largely anecdotal. In addition, more comprehensive reviews of research in the field have concluded that support for the hypothesis is limited (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Anderson, 1994) and that evidence for the U-curve is “weak, inconclusive and over-generalized” (Church, 1982, p. 542).
For all intents and purposes, the U-curve is still on trial in the intercultural court, the defense pointing to its continued popularity and its heuristic application in understanding cross-cultural transition and adaptation and the prosecution citing its limited empirical support. But before the final verdict can be returned, both methodological and theoretical issues warrant further attention. Two major shortcomings of the empirical research on the U-curve are apparent. First, the majority of the studies that have explicitly investigated the phenomenon have been based on cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal designs [see reviews by Church (1982) and Furnham & Bochner (1986); as well as recent studies such as Tanaka et al. (1994)]. The longitudinal approach is clearly more appropriate to explore changes in sojourner adjustment over time. Secondly, there is some conceptual confusion over the definition and measurement of sojourner “adjustment.” Both Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960) discussed psycho-emotional aspects of adaptation; however, as mentioned previously, cognitive and behavioral indicators of adaptation have also been interchangeably investigated in relation to length of residence abroad. Intercultural theory on sojourner transition suggests that variations in the definitions and measurements of the adjustment construct will produce contrasting patterns of fluctuation over time.

The problem of defining cross-cultural “adjustment” has been discussed at length in previous studies by Ward and colleagues that have attempted to provide a theoretical framework for synthesis of theory and research on cross-cultural transition and adaptation (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward, 1996). Along these lines, two fundamental types of sojourner adjustment have been identified. The first, termed psychological adjustment, is associated with psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction; the second, referred to as sociocultural adaptation, is related to the ability to “fit in” or negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment. An emerging program of research has demonstrated that psychological and sociocultural adjustment are inter-related but are conceptually and empirically distinct. For example, psychological adjustment is largely influenced by personality, social support and life change variables while sociocultural adaptation is more strongly affected by cultural distance, amount of contact with host nationals and cultural knowledge. Preliminary research also suggests that the two components of adjustment follow somewhat different sequences over time.

Ward and colleagues have previously argued that psychological adjustment is best understood within a stress and coping framework while sociocultural adaptation is more appropriately situated within the culture learning tradition. Given these divergent theoretical underpinnings, different temporal patterns of adaptation would be predicted. Consistent with a stress and coping approach to sojourner adjustment, the greatest psychological distress should be encountered upon entry to a new culture.
This is the point at which the individual experiences the most immediate life changes and, in all likelihood, has the most limited resources and social support. While a drop in adjustment difficulties would be expected, the longitudinal pattern is difficult to predict precisely as psychological distress is likely to be influenced by a multitude of environmental and transitional factors. Selby and Woods (1966), for example, suggested that the psychological adjustment of foreign students may fluctuate in line with changes in the academic calendar. In any case, psychological adjustment is unlikely to follow a U-curve, rather psychological distress would be anticipated to be at its peak on entry to a new culture.

The greatest sociocultural difficulties are also expected at point of entry. This is the period in which the sojourner has the least familiarity with and knowledge about the host culture. There is also limited experience of meaningful interactions with host nationals. Adaptation problems would be anticipated to decrease markedly in the early period of the sojourn and continue to decrease slightly over time. In the culture learning tradition, the acquisition of culture-specific skills would be predicted to follow a learning curve, fairly steep at the beginning of the sojourn and eventually leveling off over time.

Our earlier research with Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand seem to confirm this pattern (Ward & Kennedy, 1996a). Students experienced the greatest amount of depression (psychological adjustment problems) within the first month of arrival. Depression dropped significantly after 6 months in the country and rose again slightly 6 months later. Sociocultural adaptation problems, in contrast, commenced at a high level, dropped markedly within 6 months and slightly but not significantly over the following half year. There were, however, two limitations of this research. First, the number of subjects was quite small. Only 14 students participated in the longitudinal component of the research. Secondly, the first testing occurred within the first month of arrival in New Zealand. As Oberg (1960) has maintained that the “honeymoon” stage may last anywhere from a few days to 6 months, it is possible that these students had already entered the crisis stage of culture shock.

The major objective of this study, then, is the investigation of psychological and sociocultural adjustment over time. In line with our past research, it is hypothesized that psychological adjustment difficulties will be greatest upon entry to a new culture; the subsequent pattern of psychological adjustment, however, is not predicted. It is further hypothesized that problems in sociocultural adaptation will be greatest at entry to a new culture but that these difficulties will decrease markedly within the first months of residence in a new culture and will continue to decrease slightly over time.

A second research question pertains to the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment over time. Research data have con-
sistently exhibited a significant, positive relationship between the two adjustment domains. However, Ward and colleagues have argued that the magnitude of the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment may be affected by a variety of factors including sojourners’ need, capacity and opportunity for integration into the host culture. It has also been suggested that the greater the reliance on the host culture as the primary environment for interaction, the stronger the relationship between the two adjustment domains. For example, if sojourners choose (or are forced) to inhabit an “expatriate bubble” and have minimum interactions with host nationals, it is unlikely that there will be a strong relationship between psychological well-being and sociocultural competence. If, on the other hand, sojourners are well integrated into the host culture, the relationship between culture-specific social skills and psychological satisfaction should be greater. Along these lines, it has been previously demonstrated that the magnitude of the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment is greater in a sojourning group who makes a small (Malaysian students in Singapore) vs. a large (Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand) cross-cultural transition (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). In addition, the magnitude of the relationship between the two adjustive outcomes is greater in a sedentary (New Zealand students at home) vs. a sojourning group (New Zealand AFS students abroad; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b).

Along similar lines, it is expected that the magnitude of the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment will vary over time. In the majority of cases it is likely that the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment will be modest at entry and then increase over time as sojourners have the experience and opportunity of interacting with host nationals and immersing themselves in the host culture. In this research the sojourners arrived overseas in a large co-national cohort group and lived and studied together in a segregated school. Over the academic year they gained greater exposure to and experience with the host culture. Consequently, it is hypothesized that the relationship between sociocultural and psychological adjustment will be small, even insignificant at entry, but will increase over time as sojourners gain more intercultural experience in the host country.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 35 Japanese students (18 women and 17 men) at the International Pacific College (IPC). Their average age at date of arrival in New Zealand was 18.6 years (S.D. = 0.81 years).
International Pacific College is an institution of higher learning, which, at the time of the study, catered predominantly to Japanese students who intended to advance to international tertiary educational programs conducted in the English language. First-year students depart from Japan and arrive as a group on the IPC campus for an orientation program before the start of the academic year. During their first year of studies, they reside in student accommodation on the college campus, which is on the outskirts of Palmerston North, a university town on the North Island of New Zealand; however, students do have access to the city and the surrounding areas.

**Materials**

The questionnaire was composed of demographic information such as age, sex and length of stay in New Zealand and measures of sociocultural adjustment (social difficulty) and psychological adjustment (depression). Initially the questionnaire was written in English, then translated into Japanese by a native Japanese speaker (the second author) and finally back translated into English by another bilingual Japanese speaker to ensure linguistic equivalence.

**Sociocultural adjustment.** The Sociocultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) is concerned with the skills that are required to manage everyday social situations in a new cultural context. The development of the SCAS was based on Furnham and Bochner’s (1982) work with the Social Situations Questionnaire; however, unlike the original measurement, the reference points are not framed in affective terms (e.g., fear, anxiety, embarrassment). Subjects utilize 5-point scales (endpoints: no difficulty/extreme difficulty) to rate the amount of difficulty that they experience in various social situations. The scale has been modified for various sojourner groups and has consistently proven reliable and valid (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b). This version contains 19 items (e.g., going shopping, dealing with public transport) with scores ranging from 9–79; higher scores are associated with greater difficulty negotiating the host culture.

**Psychological Adjustment.** The Zung (1965) Self-rating Depression Scale (ZSDS) was employed to assess psychological adjustment. The ZSDS relies on 4-point rating scales (endpoints: a little of the time/most of the time) for responses to 20 statements that cover affective, physiological and psychological components of depression. The instrument scores from 0–60 with higher scores indicative of greater depression. This ZSDS has proven reliable and valid in previous sojourner research including studies
of other Asian student samples (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a).

Procedure

Subjects completed four questionnaires over the course of the research; the first within 24 hours of arriving in New Zealand, the second 4 months after arrival, the third 6 months after arrival and the final questionnaire 12 months after the initial arrival and an intervening school break. Questionnaires were distributed by the first author for the first field testing and by the fourth author for subsequent testings. Participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary. Of the 126 students who completed the arrival questionnaire, 35 (28%) produced usable questionnaires for all four testings in the longitudinal study.

RESULTS

Scalar Reliability

Preliminary data analysis consisted of testing the internal reliability of each of the scales using Cronbach’s alpha. The SCAS proved highly reliable in its original form ($a=0.85$); however, the ZSDS was reduced to 12 items to produce an internally consistent scale ($a=0.70$). Consequently, the modified ZSDS scored from 0–36.

Sociocultural and Psychological Adjustment Over Time

One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine the patterns of sociocultural and psychological adjustment from entry to 12 months. The analysis indicated significant changes in sociocultural adaptation over time; $F(3, 34)=5.89, p<0.001$. Post hoc tests revealed that the greatest amount of social difficulty was experienced at entry to New Zealand, but that there were no significant differences across the subsequent 4, 6 and 12 month time periods (Figure 1). A similar pattern was found for psychological adjustment; $F(3, 34)=5.10, p<0.003$. Post hoc analyses revealed that subjects produced the highest depression scores at the initial testing. There were no significant differences in depression, however, across the subsequent three testings (Figure 2).

As only 35 of the original 126 subjects participated in all four testings, comparisons were made between these 35 subjects and the remaining 91

\[\text{1The reliability analysis was based on the original sample of 126 respondents. The Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale was originally administered as a 19-item scale, omitting the item on sexual enjoyment.}\]
students at the first testing. $T$-test revealed that there were no significant differences in either psychological adjustment [$t(2, 124)=0.40$] or sociocultural adaptation [$t(2, 124)=0.21$] on entry to New Zealand. These findings suggest a diminished probability of sample bias.
FIGURE 2. Depression over time.
The Relationship between Sociocultural and Psychological Adjustment

Pearson correlations were performed on sociocultural and psychological adjustment at each of the four time periods. The correlations were: \( r = -0.05 \) (ns) at entry, \( r = 0.19 \) (ns) at 4 months, \( r = 0.16 \) (ns) at 6 months and \( r = 0.36 \) \( (p < 0.05) \) at 12 months. A test for significant differences between correlations indicated a significant increase between entry and 12 months; \( z = 1.71, p < 0.05 \), one-tailed. There were no significant differences among comparisons between the other testing periods.

DISCUSSION

The research examined variations in and the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment over time in a group of Japanese students in New Zealand. In line with the hypotheses, both psychological (depression) and sociocultural (social difficulty) adjustment problems were greatest at entry to the new culture. Adjustment difficulties decreased between entry and four months of overseas experience with no further significant changes at the 6 and 12 month testings. In addition, as predicted, the magnitude of the correlation between psychological and sociocultural adjustment increased over time, with significant differences found between point of entry and 1 year of residence abroad.

Comparisons may be made between these findings and both the Lysgaard (1955) original research on the stages and schedule of sojourner adaptation and the Oberg (1960) sequential description of culture shock. In the first instance and in contrast to Lysgaard’s cross-sectional research, no evidence was found to suggest that psychological adjustment is better in the first six months compared to the 6–12 month period; in fact, elevated levels of depression occurred in conjunction with students’ overseas arrival. Secondly, with respect to Oberg’s model, there is no support for a euphoric “honeymoon” stage of entry to a new country. Psychological distress, rather than euphoria, appeared to characterize entry to a foreign milieu. Furthermore, as sojourners were tested within 24 hours of arrival in their new country of residence, these data are particularly powerful in undermining the validity of Oberg’s theorizing. Previous studies of cross-cultural transition and adaptation, including some of the best designed longitudinal research, have failed to capture sojourners so early in the entry phase (e.g., Kealey, 1989; Zheng & Berry, 1991).

These results are in line with our past research (Ward & Kennedy, 1996a) and complement more comprehensive and more recent longitudinal investigations of cross-cultural transition and adaptation. Klineberg and Hull (1979), for example, undertook a massive study of foreign student adjustment, examining adaptation in both cross-sectional and longitudinal
data. They reported no support for a U-curve in depression, loneliness or homesickness in their extensive cross-sectional data from foreign students in both developing and industrialized countries. In addition, in-depth longitudinal data collected from 68 students in France, Brazil and the United States revealed that only three subjects experienced a U-curve of psychological adjustment to their foreign universities. Rather, the majority of students felt lonely and depressed at the beginning of their sojourn. Similar findings were reported by Kealey (1989) in his work with Canadian technical assistants on overseas placements. Combining cross-sectional and longitudinal data on 277 volunteers, he reported that only 10% of the sample produced evidence of a U-curve of psychological adjustment (feelings of satisfaction) over a two-year period abroad. More recently, the Nash (1991) research with American students in France demonstrated no support of U-curve fluctuations in anxiety over a 10-month sojourn abroad. All in all, there appears to be considerable hard data available from longitudinal studies of psychological adjustment of sojourners to discredit the U-curve proposition, and contrary to popular theorizing, it is more likely that sojourners commence their overseas stay in a state of at least moderate psychological distress.

In contrast to psychological adjustment, sociocultural adaptation, in the main, has not been investigated in reference to the U-curve. There is, however, related work by Torbiorn (1982) which examined fluctuations in host culture knowledge during cross-cultural transition. Although valiantly attempting to locate the elusive U-curve, his cross-sectional data were more persuasive in confirming an increase in knowledge over time. Our own cross-sectional research has demonstrated the same temporal pattern of knowledge acquisition (Armes & Ward, 1989) and sociocultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). More importantly, these findings, which reveal a high level of social difficulty upon entry to a new environment and a rapid and marked drop in sociocultural adjustment problems, are consistent with our previous longitudinal research on Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand as well as New Zealand volunteers abroad (Ward & Kennedy, 1996a, 1996b). Results reconfirm the relatively rapid acquisition of sociocultural skills over time.

A second area of interest in this study has been variations in the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment over time. Our past research has consistently reported significant, positive correlations between the two adjustment domains. Studies with a variety of sojourning groups (students, domestic workers, businesspeople and spouses, diplomats, aid workers and volunteers) in diverse cultural settings have produced correlations between 0.23–0.72, with a median of 0.31 over 11 samples. However, it has been argued that the magnitude of this relationship will be affected by numerous factors, including the sojourner’s association with the host culture. It has been hypothesized, for example, that
the more sojourners rely upon the host culture as the primary operating environment, i.e., the more enmeshed they are, the stronger the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adaptation. This has been previously documented in sojourners who have made small, vs. large, cross-cultural transitions and in sedentary, vs. sojourning, groups (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b). In addition, psychological and sociocultural adaptation are strongly related in those instances where sojourners have little or no co-national supports and are forced to operate exclusively within the host culture milieu. For example, our research with Volunteer Services Abroad (the New Zealand counterpart to the American Peace Corps) has, to date, generated the strongest correlation (0.72) between the two adjustment domains (Ward & Kennedy, 1996b).

In a number of instances, the magnitude of the relationship between sojourners’ psychological and sociocultural adjustment would be expected to increase over time. This was predicted and confirmed for the group under study. In this case the Japanese students commenced their stay in New Zealand by entering a largely culturally homogeneous and segregated environment at International Pacific College. Over the academic year they had greater access to the host culture and were able to acquire more exposure to and experience with the host nationals. Moving from separatism to at least some level of integration was associated with an increase in the strength of the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adaptation. It should be noted, however, that this pattern of variation in correlations over time is not expected to generalize indiscriminately to all sojourning groups. The type of group and circumstances surrounding their transition requires careful consideration in the prediction of the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Although this study has made a valuable contribution to understanding the process of cross-cultural transition and adjustment, it is not without its limitations. On methodological grounds, psychometric concerns arise in connection with the reliability of the Zung Self-rating Depression Scale as a measurement of psychological adjustment with Japanese students. The ZSDS has been used widely in cross-cultural studies of depression, and the full scale reliability of the English version has held up in our own research with diverse sojourning groups. In this study, however, the back translated version of the scale was reduced to 12 items to achieve sufficient internal consistency. This may raise questions about the most appropriate choice of instruments to assess psychological adjustment of Japanese students. We believe that there is no convincing reason to argue that the translation and item deletion have adversely affected the scale’s validity; in fact, the Zung (1969) research with the instrument corroborated its validity with Japanese subjects via the correlations between ZSDS scores and physicians’ ratings of depression. However, as cross-cultural research also indicates that the symptoms of depression may be manifest differently
and occur with varying frequencies across cultures (Marsella, 1980), additional measurements of psychological adjustment difficulties could have strengthened our findings.

Another methodological concern relates to the size and the nature of the sample. The research achieved a relatively good response rate for voluntary participation in a longitudinal study; however, only 28% of the original sample participated in all four field testings. The comparison between these subjects and the subsequent dropouts at the first testing revealed no significant differences in the psychological and sociocultural adjustment scores. While this diminishes the probability of a sample bias, it is still impossible to conclude that the students who did not participate in all four testings experienced the same pattern of adjustment over time.

It should also be borne in mind that the generalizability of our conceptual alternative to the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment may be limited by social and cultural factors. On the first count our subjects commenced their overseas stay in an expatriate enclave, arriving as a first year cohort of international students and living in an environment that is relatively detached from the host culture. Adjustment patterns of sojourners who commence their relocation primarily in an “expatriate bubble” may differ from those who adopt a more consistent integrated approach to life in a new culture. Indeed, we have already advanced this argument with respect to the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment over time. On the second count, the research was confined to Japanese students who relocated to New Zealand. As we have previously argued, the process and product of sojourner adaptation should not be assumed to be universal and cultural origins and destinations of sojourners should be taken into account in the examination of cross-cultural transition and adaptation (Ward and Kennedy, 1993a).

Despite the encouraging findings reported here, further research is still warranted on the patterns of cross-cultural adjustment over time. As previously argued, future investigators should concentrate on longitudinal studies to examine temporal fluctuations in sojourner adaptation. Research with different types of sojourning groups originating from a variety of cultural origins and relocating to a variety of cultural destinations should be pursued. It is also necessary to identify carefully and to define precisely the type of adjustment under study and to specify any limitations concerning the generalizability of research findings. With respect to psychological well-being, more specifically, it may also be important to consider any time of year effects. Is it possible, for example, that foreign students experience the greatest levels of psychological distress during examination periods or that depression decreases over holidays?

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2Longitudinal questionnaire research often loses approximately half of its respondents in each subsequent testing (Weissman & Furnham, 1987; Rogers & Ward, 1993).
irrespective of length of sojourn? In these cases a comparative, longitudinal sample of local students may be able to tease out sojourn-specific vs. more general variations in psychological well-being over time. Most certainly, there is considerable scope and future potential for well-designed theory-driven and applied research on sojourner adjustment, and this research is best undertaken in broad, multi-cultural contexts.

In conclusion, neither the results from this study nor the findings from other longitudinal investigations of cross-cultural transition lend substantial support to the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment. The U-curve has been on trial now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected, and more promising conceptual perspectives such as stress and coping theories and culture learning approaches should be further and more profitably investigated.

REFERENCES


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