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An Examination of Trinidad Extension Officers' Behavioral Beliefs and Intent to Participate in an International Extension Experience

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Abstract

Participation in an international extension experience empowers extension professionals to meet the needs of diverse clientele in an increasingly global world. A survey of governmental extension workers in Trinidad was conducted to understand how their behavioral beliefs about an international extension experience influenced their intention to participate in such an experience. Behavioral beliefs can be positively or negatively modified based on an individual's perceptions of the components (time, location, activities) of a specific international extension experience, so manipulating the components should cause corresponding changes in behavioral beliefs and ultimately intent to participate. This study found positive behavioral beliefs about international extension experience participation are held by Trinidadian extension officers. They are willing to travel to a wide variety of locations and are most interested in acquiring hands-on experience and working one-on-one with another extension professional. The most desirable locations and activities should be integrated into international extension experiences in order to positively influence behavioral beliefs, and thereby intent to participate. Future research is needed to more closely examine the impact of participation on extension officers in Trinidad.

Keywords: extension, training and development, human resource development, professional development

Introduction & Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Professionals with an international perspective are becoming increasingly more important as globalization expands (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). In order to address the information needs of diverse, globally competent clientele, extension professionals must have a multi-cultural skill set designed to work with diverse audiences (Ludwig & McGirr, 2003). International experiences provide food and agricultural scientists with a breadth of knowledge and skills considered critical to their future success within a global agricultural industry (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). The development of international education initiatives empowers extension professionals to become global citizens, bridging the cultural gaps of their international awareness (McGowan, 2007; Place, Vergot, Dragon, & Hightower, 2008).

International experiences have been shown to positively impact learning. Smith, Jayaratne, Moore, Kistler, and Smith (2010) found extension professionals with international experience were significantly more likely to have a global mindset. "A new appreciation for extension's role in international development" (Place et al., 2008, p. 8) was reported by extension professionals as a direct result of their first-hand international experience in Latin America. Suarez (2003) found that immersion in a foreign country assisted individuals in developing a sense of cultural awareness and an increased sensitivity to the needs of diverse audiences.

The involvement of extension professionals in international extension experiences (IEEs) also has the potential to positively impact their clientele. Research has shown that most people have limited opportunities for direct experience with countries and cultures other than their own (Ludwig, 1994). This is especially true in Trinidad where 35% of farming is subsistence level (Maximay, 2005); subsistence farmers are even less likely to

have the means required for direct international experiences yet stand much to gain from exposure to global markets. An alternative way to develop global competence in place-bound extension audiences is through vicarious exposure based on the international experiences of globally-competent extension professionals. This study is part of an effort to understand how extension professionals worldwide view participating in international extension experiences.

Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Ajzen postulated human behavior is guided by behavioral, normative, and control beliefs. Behavioral beliefs represent how likely an individual is to engage in a specific behavior, including their assessment of the specific behavior (Ajzen, 2002). An individual's behavioral beliefs are caused by holding either a favorable or unfavorable attitude towards the behavior in question. Normative beliefs are tied to the individual's perception of what other important individuals or groups believe or expect in regards to the specific behavior. The subjective norm an individual creates around a specific behavior, and how much weight they put into the subjective norm they have created, has a direct influence on their normative beliefs (Ajzen, 2002). Control beliefs represent the pros and cons the individual associates with the specific behavior and their perceived power over how positive or negative those influences may be as a result of engaging in the behavior (Ajzen, 2002). An individual's control beliefs directly influence their perceived behavioral control related to engaging in the behavior.

By manipulating any or all of these three beliefs, an individual's intention can be modified; increasing the probability the individual will perform the desired behavior (Francis et al., 2004). This study examined behavioral belief influences on intention in relation to participating in an international

extension experience. Whether or not an individual will engage in a specific behavior is believed to be directly tied to behavioral beliefs (Ajzen, 2002). Therefore, those with the most positive behavioral beliefs towards international extension experiences are most likely to form an intention to participate (Ajzen, 1991).

Previous literature has shown that extension professionals who have been involved in international extension initiatives believe they are positive experiences (Crago, 1998; Lev, 2001; Place, 1998; Place, Vergot, & Dragon, 2005; Richardson & Woods, 1991). In addition, the more time an extension professional spends abroad has been directly associated with an enhanced sense of concern for people in all parts of the world, increased appreciation for diversity, and an appreciation for the interconnectedness of people around the world (Gillian, 1995; Hett, 1993). However, the amount of time away from family and work has been found to be a major barrier to extension professionals engaging in international experiences (Lamm & Harder, 2010; Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, & Hamilton, 2006). Due to a need to keep time away from home at a minimum, short-term international experiences are becoming more common (Festervand & Tillery, 2001; Paus & Robinson, 2008). Despite these challenges, extension systems around the world are expressing a need for the globalization of national agricultural extension systems (Qamar, 2002) and a trend towards international experiences can be noticed across the globe (Smith et al., 2010).

When studying location preferences for international extension experiences, Lamm and Harder (2010) found those areas of the world needing the most assistance (e.g. Africa, Middle East) were the locations U.S. extension professionals were most afraid to travel to. While no other studies of extension professionals were found which

examined location preferences, Evans, Finch, Toncar, and Reid (2008) found Italy, England, France, China, Germany, Australia, Japan, and Ireland were the locations identified by U.S. students as most desirable for study tours. Students were not interested in traveling to developing countries (Evans et al., 2008). A gap in the literature exists with regard to where individuals in developing countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, are interested in traveling academically or professionally.

Through an examination of the types of activities participants of international experiences perceived as valuable Place et al. (2008) found first-hand experience was essential. Participants reported their direct engagement with Latin Americans while traveling abroad was what built their credibility with diverse clientele upon their return home (Place et al., 2008). Participants of international experiences also reported immersion (an experiential learning technique) as one of the most valuable parts of their experience. Participants engaged in an international experience focused on bilingualism and enhanced multiculturalism found immersion was a powerful learning tool that allowed them to rely on their background experiences when working with others (Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003). In addition, Myles and Cheng (2003) found that participants willing to embrace communication with their hosts adapted more easily to their environment, resulting in a higher level of foreign language skills and knowledge of the culture, than their counterparts that chose not to embrace interactions with their hosts.

A conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1. According to Ajzen (2002), normative, behavioral, and control beliefs influence intent to act. Of these, behavioral beliefs are the easiest for an extension organization to influence. Behavioral beliefs can be positively or negatively modified based on an individual's perceptions of the components

(time, location, activities) of a specific IEE, so manipulating the components should

cause corresponding changes in behavioral beliefs and ultimately intent to participate.

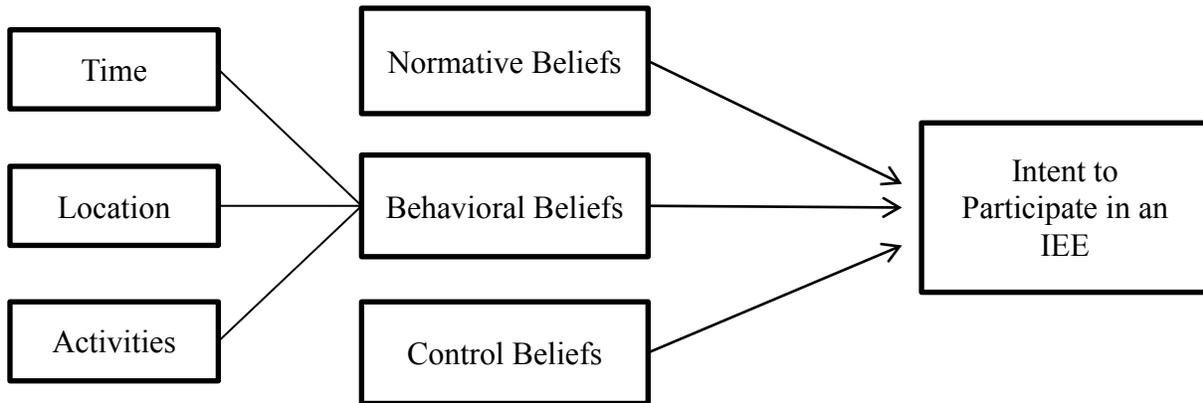


Figure 1. Flow chart illustrating the influence of international extension experience preferences on behavioral beliefs and intent to participate.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand how Trinidad extension officers’ behavioral beliefs about an international extension experience (IEE) influenced their intention to participate in an IEE. Specifically, the objectives were to:

1. Determine extension officers’ perceptions of the importance of an IEE as a component of their work and their interest in participating in an IEE.
2. Describe extension officers’ time, location, and activity preferences for participation in an IEE.
3. Determine if differences existed in extension officers’ time, location, and activity preferences for participation by their beliefs of the importance of an IEE.

Methods

All public Extension officers in Trinidad were the subjects of this inquiry. The national extension system in Trinidad is comprised of the Government-led (state) extension and state-assisted extension services. Government extension officers work directly with farmers, conduct

agricultural education, and participate in additional regulatory functions. The percentage of each type of work done varies depending on where the officers work. State-assisted extension organizations perform specialized extension services, such as cocoa production assistance, marketing, and agribusiness development. Together, the government-led and state-assisted extension systems comprise approximately 150 Extension officers. Private extension is small in size and was not considered for this study.

The survey instrument used for the study was originally developed by Rieger (n.d.) to measure undergraduate students’ interest in participating in a study abroad experience. The instrument was then adapted by Lamm and Harder (2010) to fit the professional context of the U.S. Cooperative Extension system. The instrument was reviewed and further revisions were made based on input from two contextual experts asked to evaluate the instrument’s validity. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Director of Extension Services in the Ministry of Agriculture following a formal written request.

The instrument contained two sections and demographics items. Participants were asked to indicate their opinion regarding participation in an IEE as a component of their work by selecting if an IEE was not, slightly, somewhat, or very important. Participants were also asked to indicate if they were interested, not interested, or had already participated in an IEE.

The extension officers' preferences for IEEs were measured in the second section. Participants were asked to indicate the number of weeks they would prefer to spend on an IEE. Next, participants were asked to rate the appeal of 22 locations using a four point scale (1 = *Very Unappealing*, 2 = *Somewhat Unappealing*, 3 = *Somewhat Appealing*, 4 = *Very Appealing*). The United Nation's (2010) listing and definitions of geographical sub-regions were used for this study. Participants were provided with a Web site address to consult if they needed more information on the countries included in each sub-region. Finally, participants were asked to rate the level of personal importance of six formal and six informal IEE activities using a four point scale (1 = *Very Unimportant*, 2 = *Somewhat Unimportant*, 3 = *Somewhat Important*, 4 = *Very Important*). The reliability of the formal activities and informal activities constructs were calculated *ex post facto* using Cronbach's alpha coefficient at $r = .91$ and $r = .85$, respectively.

Data was collected in person during August 2010 by one of the authors who visited all extension offices on the day of the week that all extension officers are required to be in office. A short oral presentation was conducted to introduce the International Extension Experiences (IEE) topic. At the conclusion of the presentation the paper questionnaire was distributed to the Extension officers present. The instruments were completed without difficulty in about 15 minutes and were collected at the same time. Forms were left with supervisors for

completion by absentee staff at the earliest opportunity. Some were completed and returned. Follow-up telephone calls were made to get all completed; however, this did not yield much improvement. A total of 110 completed forms were collected and coded for data analysis, resulting in a 73.33% response rate. To control for nonresponse error, respondents' personal characteristics were compared with known characteristics of the population (Miller & Smith, 1983) using a Chi-Square test. Respondents' characteristics were not significantly different from that of the population and were considered representative of the population.

Participants were asked to identify their gender, age, educational level, and tenure of employment in a demographics section of the questionnaire. The respondents for this study tended to be male ($n = 70$, 63.10%), in their twenties ($n = 46$, 41.40%), and had completed secondary level education and diploma level training in agriculture ($n = 51$, 45.90%) or a bachelor's degree ($n = 45$, 40.50%). The average length of employment tenure was ten years ($M = 9.99$, $SD = 9.01$) but there was considerable variation with a skew towards employees with five years of experience or fewer ($n = 46$, 41.40%). Participants were not asked to identify their race/ethnicity in this survey due to the complex nature of these topics (Birth, 2008; Eriksen, 1992) in Trinidad and Tobago. Although race/ethnicity questions were not included in the survey, Trinidad and Tobago's population is largely composed of Indian (40.00%), African (37.50%), and mixed (20.50%) ethnic groups (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). It can be assumed that the majority of respondents for this study have ties to one or more of these groups.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the first two objectives. The third objective used *t*-tests to determine if significant differences existed in IEE preferences based on behavioral beliefs.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), individuals with the most positive behavioral beliefs are more likely to have an intention to act than their counterparts. Therefore respondents were categorized into two groups based on their behavioral beliefs for the purpose of the objective. The first group consisted of the respondents who indicated that an IEE was a “very important” component of their work while the second group consisted of the respondents who indicated an IEE was “somewhat important.” Respondents who felt an IEE was “slightly” or “not at all” important were excluded from analysis due to their negligible numbers. An *ex post facto* examination of the data revealed little variation in respondents’ level of interest in IEE participation, so this variable was not considered during the categorization. Cohen’s interpretation of effect sizes was used to evaluate the strength of association between the variables (Cohen, 1988; Cohen, 1992). Results from *t*-tests were interpreted

by defining small, medium, and large effect sizes at the .20, .50, and .80 levels, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

Findings/Results

Objective 1: Importance and Interest

Respondents indicated their opinions regarding interest in IEE participation and the perceived importance of an IEE as a component of their work in extension. The majority (*n* = 104, 93.70%) of respondents expressed personal interest in participating in an IEE. Only seven respondents (6.30%) were not interested.

Table 1 displays respondents’ perceptions of the importance of an IEE as a component of their work in extension. The majority (*n* = 78, 70.30%) of respondents believed IEEs were a very important component of their work. Only two respondents (1.80%) thought IEEs were not at all important.

Table 1
Respondents’ Opinions Regarding Participation in an IEE

Statement	<i>f</i>	%
It is very important. ^a	78	70.30
It is somewhat important. ^b	28	25.20
It is slightly important. ^b	3	2.70
It is not at all important. ^b	2	1.80

Note. *N* = 111. ^a Group 1 respondents. ^b Group 2 respondents.

Objective 2: IEE Preferences

Respondents indicated their preference for the number of weeks that they would like to spend on an IEE. Responses ranged from less than a week (*n* = 2, 1.80%) to over a year (*n* = 1, .90%). The mode response to the number of weeks the respondents would like to spend on an IEE was four weeks (*n* = 24, 21.8%), with 52.70% (*n* = 58) preferring to spend four weeks or less on an IEE. Only 9.10% (*n* = 13) of the respondents wanted an IEE lasting sixteen weeks or more.

Respondents rated the appeal of 22 selected locations (see Table 2). Respondents rated each location as somewhat appealing with the exception of Micronesia (*M* = 2.43, *SD* = .99), which was rated as somewhat unappealing. The sub-region of Australia and New Zealand (*M* = 3.44, *SD* = .88) was considered to be the most appealing of the selection locations, followed closely by Central America (*M* = 3.43, *SD* = .86) and South America (*M* = 3.42, *SD* = .78).

Table 2
Respondents' Perceptions of Selected Locations by Individual Response Item

Location Items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Australia and New Zealand	110	3.44	.88
Central America	111	3.43	.86
South America	110	3.42	.78
Caribbean (excluding Trinidad & Tobago)	111	3.39	.92
Europe	110	3.35	.88
Northern America	109	3.16	1.00
India	110	3.06	.98
Any developed country	104	3.02	1.00
Any developing country	105	2.98	1.04
Central Asia	109	2.94	.96
Eastern Asia	109	2.82	.98
Southern Africa	109	2.80	1.01
Southern Asia (excluding India)	108	2.71	1.02
Western Asia	107	2.70	.99
Western Africa	109	2.67	1.02
South-Eastern Asia	108	2.67	1.00
Northern Africa	110	2.60	1.00
Eastern Africa	110	2.59	1.05
Polynesia	104	2.56	.99
Middle Africa	110	2.56	1.02
Melanesia	108	2.54	1.04
Micronesia	104	2.43	.99

Note. Scale: 1 = *Very Unappealing*, 2 = *Somewhat Unappealing*, 3 = *Somewhat Appealing*, 4 = *Very Appealing*.

Respondents rated the importance of 12 formal and informal activities known to be typical components of an IEE (see Table 3). Respondents felt acquiring hands-on experience and skills ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .85$), and working one-on-one with an extension

professional were very important activities ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .82$). The remaining ten activities were perceived by the respondents to be somewhat important, with free time apart from the group receiving the least favorable perception ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .95$).

Table 3
Perceptions of the Importance of IEE Activities

Activity	Type	n	M	SD
Acquiring hands-on experience and skills	Formal	111	3.67	.85
Work one-on-one with an extension professional	Formal	111	3.65	.82
In-field lectures and labs	Formal	105	3.49	.83
Socializing with extension professionals or citizens of host country	Informal	111	3.48	.88
Traveling in country (i.e. visiting more than just one area)	Informal	109	3.45	.83
Participating in ongoing field research or performing your own research project	Formal	111	3.31	.98
Attending classes at foreign universities	Formal	110	3.17	.86
Speaking and learning host country language	Informal	111	3.17	.90
Staying with host family (i.e. learning about a different culture)	Informal	107	3.14	.91
Earning academic credit through courses at foreign universities	Formal	111	3.09	1.00
Sightseeing – museums, historical, archaeological sites	Informal	111	3.03	.89
Free time to do what you apart from group	Informal	111	2.83	.95

Note. Scale: 1 = *Very Unimportant*, 2 = *Somewhat Unimportant*, 3 = *Somewhat Important*, 4 = *Very Important*.

Objective 3: Differences in Travel Preferences by Behavioral Beliefs

There were no significant differences in respondents’ time or location preferences when comparing respondents who felt IEEs to be very important versus respondents who felt IEEs were somewhat important. However, significant differences did exist when comparing the two groups’ preferences for activities when grouped as

formal and informal activity constructs. As shown in Table 4, significant differences existed between respondents based on their perceptions of the importance of informal activities, $t(100) = 2.71, p < .05$. The effect size was medium ($d = .64$), respectively. Respondents who felt IEEs were very important had significantly more positive perceptions of the importance of informal activities during an IEE.

Table 4
Comparison of Respondents’ Perceptions by Activity Construct

Construct by Group	n	M	SD	t	p
Formal Activities					
Very Important	74	3.48	.69	2.07	.05
Somewhat Important	25	3.15	.82		
Informal Activities					
Very Important	75	3.29	.60	2.71	*.01
Somewhat Important	26	2.88	.67		

Note. Scale: 1 = *Very Unimportant*, 2 = *Somewhat Unimportant*, 3 = *Somewhat Important*, 4 = *Very Important*.

* $p < .05$

An individual item analysis of perceptions of informal activities also revealed significant differences between respondents based on their views of IEE importance (see Table 5). Perceptions of staying with a host family were significantly

different, $t(101) = 3.72, p < .05$. The effect size was large ($d = .81$). Perceptions of speaking and learning a host country language were significantly different, $t(105) = 3.66, p < .05$. The effect size was medium ($d = .76$).

Table 5
Comparison of Respondents' Perceptions by Informal Activity

Activity by Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Staying with host family					
Very Important	75	3.33	.83	3.72	*.01
Somewhat Important	27	2.63	.88		
Speaking and learning host country language					
Very Important	78	3.36	.79	3.66	*.01
Somewhat Important	28	2.68	.98		

Note. Scale: 1 = *Very Unimportant*, 2 = *Somewhat Unimportant*, 3 = *Somewhat Important*, 4 = *Very Important*.

* $p < .05$

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

Viewed in the context of Ajzen's (2002) theory of planned behavior, the findings from this study imply positive behavioral beliefs about IEE participation are held by Trinidad extension officers. The Trinidad extension officers were open to traveling almost anywhere which opposes Lamm and Harder's (2010) findings regarding U.S. extension agents' preferences for locations of IEEs. Trinidad extension officers' willingness to travel increases their opportunities to be exposed to many cultures. The diversity of races and ethnic groups that comprise the population of Trinidad and Tobago, or its status as a developing rather than a developed country, may help explain the officers' openness to traveling to a variety of international locations.

Lamm and Harder (2010) suggested marketing preferred locations for IEEs to U.S. extension agents to increase the likelihood of participation. Given the

widespread enthusiasm for traveling nearly anywhere in the world that was expressed by

the Trinidad extension officers, it may be more useful to highlight destinations that have something specific to offer. One example would be to encourage Trinidad extension officers to seek out IEEs that would allow them to learn about a different type of extension model. Trinidad and Tobago uses a Ministry-based model for extension, so it may be very informative for its officers to learn about more participatory or market-driven extension approaches or to understand the linkages involved in a University-based extension system. Even visiting Australia and New Zealand, which were perceived as the most appealing locations, could prove beneficial as a case study example of how public extension systems transitioned to private delivery. The lessons learned from IEEs that are intentionally focused on learning about a different extension models may be applied to strengthen practices at home in Trinidad.

Alternatively, Trinidad extension officers may find value in seeking out

countries for IEEs that are using an innovative approach to address shared issues, particularly within the Caribbean region. Trinidad extension officers should also consider opportunities for advancing program expertise, acquiring language skills, and/or developing collaborative relationships with international extension colleagues when selecting an IEE destination. Being intentional about the reasons for the IEE from the outset may lead to a more valuable experience for the participants, and in turn, for their clientele.

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that IEEs were a very important component of their jobs. IEEs have been linked with enhanced professional development for extension agents (Smith et al., 2001) and an increased ability to effectively serve clientele (Ludwig, 1994). While IEEs are seen as “vacations” by critics, this research suggests that extension officers perceive IEEs to be much more formally linked to their job performance and are most interested in activities that allow them to advance their knowledge and skills in job-related areas. All participants indicated that IEEs were a very important means of formally acquiring hands-on experiences and skills and working one-on-one with extension professionals. Participants who thought IEEs were a very important component of their work were statistically more likely to want to stay with a host family and learn the language, which implies a belief that understanding other cultures is linked with job performance. Leisure and tourism activities such as sightseeing and free time were seen as less important.

An implication exists that extension officers’ primary motive for participation in IEEs is linked to the direct benefits they receive in terms of professional development and their abilities to better meet their clientele’s needs. Consistent with previous research (Howard et al., 2003; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Place et al., 2008),

participants recognize the value of first-hand, immersive experiences when engaging internationally. Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behavior indicates positively manipulating behavioral beliefs can lead to intent to participate, so organizations interested in hosting Trinidad extension officers should plan and market IEEs that focus on gaining hands-on experience and interacting with other extension professionals. An IEE that includes job shadowing would be ideal. Impact statements of the IEEs should be developed and participants should share their experiences with colleagues and clientele alike to demonstrate the benefits of IEEs for the extension organization and its clientele.

Additional research should be conducted to see if the developed versus developing country influence is true worldwide given the activity preference differences noted between U.S. and Trinidad extension agents when participating in IEEs. Continuing this line of research, by examining extension agents’ perceptions of IEEs in other countries around the world, will assist those creating IEEs in tailoring them to suit their target audience’s specific needs. Lastly, research looking at participants’ perceptions using a preflexion/reflection design should be conducted to look at the actual impact of IEEs on extension agents. A targeted preflexion/reflection design would offer a perspective on how specific activities extension agents engaged in while on an IEE altered their cultural perspectives, adding to their effectiveness on the job.

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