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Study Abroad Programs and Their Effects on Cultural Perceptions and International Awareness

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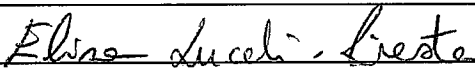
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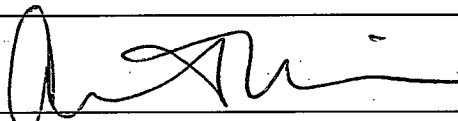
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**Study Abroad Programs and Their Effects on Cultural Perceptions and International
Awareness**

A Thesis

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College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Sarah Ann Hundt

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Abstract

As study abroad programs become increasingly popular among U.S. colleges and universities, a study of Butler University students who had studied abroad between Spring 2007 and Fall 2009 was conducted to examine the impacts of study abroad experiences. The study used an online survey to measure areas of world awareness, host country bond, personal growth, future plans, American pride, and acceptance of others. Using OLS analyses, the results showed that a first study abroad experience prior to the individual's second study abroad experience heightened their level of world awareness. The study also showed that as students had more cultural contact in their housing situations abroad, their level of American pride was lower. Finally, the study showed that the majority of students experienced a large change regarding their appreciation of other cultures, appreciation of other international students, and their confidence in making friends with people from other countries. The findings have implications on the positive effects of study abroad programs, and suggestions for further research were included.

Introduction

We live in a rapidly globalizing world. Through trade agreements, expanding technologies, and international treaties, the world in which we abide is becoming increasingly interconnected. In less than a decade, world exports have more than doubled, now exceeding the 2008 figure of \$15,754,000 million dollars (International Merchandise Trade 2008), while almost 2 billion people now have access to the Internet (World Internet Usage 2009). As a result of this globalization phenomenon, more stress is being put on higher education to prepare students to enter into the global workforce. One way this can be done is through study abroad.

As current students are graduating and searching for jobs, they have begun to find that experiences such as study abroad and speaking a foreign language can put them a step ahead of other competitors. As reported in the Boston Globe, Jim Smith from the Cambridge Center for Adult Education says, "With globalization an increasing phenomenon, if someone only understands English, to an employer, they're less and less useful to the world" (Kasselman 2007). Currently, the United States is lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of language ability. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, only 13% of the population over 18 years was bilingual (Language Use 2000). This pales in comparison to the 66% of the world's children who are raised bilingual (Worldwatch Institute 2001). Fortunately, with the increasing popularity of study abroad programs, students can gain the cultural sensitivity and develop the personal skills that are favored in the globalized workforce.

Many study abroad programs tout the benefits of studying in another country, and the development that students will undergo as a result of the program. For example, in one study, (Thomlison 1991) 174 students who had participated in a study abroad program in England were surveyed. Results showed that "substantial changes were reported in attitudes, beliefs, values,

students have prior to studying abroad. Because they have been repeatedly exposed to norms in their own culture, this forms the foundation in which they will experience their own culture, as well as others. As they travel abroad, they bring their previous cultural experience with them.

Nishida's third axiom builds off the first: "The acquisition of the schemas of the host culture is a necessary condition for sojourners' cross-cultural adaptation to the culture" (Gudykunst, 2004, p. 410). This axiom introduces the premise that students who study abroad will find it necessary to attain the host culture schemas. If they refuse to engage in behavior congruent with the host culture (i.e., they make friends only with Americans), the adaptation process will never occur. In order for students to undergo change, they must willingly acquire the schemas of the host culture.

The fourth axiom explains the key to cultural change in sojourners.

"Fact-and-concept, person, self, role, context, procedure, strategy, and emotion schemas are interrelated with each other, forming a network of cultural schemas to generate behaviors that are appropriate in the culture. Experience in the host culture causes a change in one cultural schema. This further causes changes in all the other cultural schemas and finally in the total system (i.e., in behavior)" (Gudykunst, 2004, p. 410).

As students spend more time in their host culture, they can begin the process of adaptation. By being exposed multiple times to various cultural patterns, they then begin to develop these same behaviors in their own minds, therefore allowing them to adapt to the culture. This is how students studying abroad can better understand cultures, or develop personally in relation to their experiences. This fourth axiom allows studies to research to what extent students really undergo this cultural change.

2006-07 academic year alone, 241,791 American students went abroad, an 8% increase from the previous year and a 150% increase from the previous decade (Obst 2007). However, considering that the number of students enrolled in a degree-granting college in 2005 was 17,487,000 (U.S. Department of Education 2008), this is a study abroad rate of less than 2%. By conducting more research to validate the proposed benefits of study abroad programs, more students will be encouraged to add an international perspective to their studies. The goal of the current research is to examine to what extent study abroad programs through Butler University, a school where over 25% of students will study abroad during their four-year career (personal communication, March 20, 2009), affect students' perception of culture, awareness of the world, and personal development.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The number of years that a student studies the host country language prior to departure will positively influence the host country bond.

Hypothesis 2: As an individual participates in more travel outside his or her host country, the levels of the dependent variables of world awareness and acceptance of others will be higher. In addition, future plans will have a high level of change.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals who have had a prior study abroad experience will have a higher level of world awareness, host country bond, and personal growth than those who have not had a prior experience abroad.

Hypothesis 4: Individuals who have had prior travel to their host country will have a higher level of host country bond than those who had not previously traveled to their host country.

Years of language study was measured with the question, "How many years did you study this language before going abroad?" Responses were coded as 0 years [0], 1-2 years [1], 3-4 years [2], 5-6 years [3], or 7+ years [4].

Credit hours were measured with the question, "How many credit hours did you take while studying abroad?" Responses were coded as 12 hours [0], 14 hours [1], 15 hours [2], 16 hours [3], 18 hours [4], or other [5].

Housing was measured with the question, "Where did you live while you were abroad?" Responses were coded as host family [0], university-based housing [1], or apartment with Americans [2].

Travel outside host country was measured with the question, "What was your extent of travel outside your host country while you were abroad?" Responses were coded as stayed in host country [0], little [1], moderate [2], or frequent [3].

Prior travel to host country was measured with the question, "Had you traveled to your host country before your study abroad experience?" Responses were coded as yes [1] or no [0].

Prior study abroad was measured with the question, "Had you had experience living or studying abroad in another country prior to this study abroad experience?" Responses were coded as yes [1] or no [0].

Descriptive statistics of both independent and dependent variables are shown in Table 1.

Dependent Variables

Six scales were created after factor analysis of the original 42 survey questions revealed similar patterns among groups of questions. All dependent variable questions either asked the respondent to rate their level of agreement with a statement (0 being strongly disagree and 4

The scale for the "personal growth" variable was created from the following survey questions: (a) "How much have you changed regarding communication skills?"; (b) "How much have you changed regarding self-confidence?"; (c) "How much have you changed regarding respect for those different from yourself?"; (d) "How much have you changed regarding your confidence in meeting new people?"; (e) "How much have you changed regarding your confidence in making friendships with people from another country?"; (f) "How much have you changed regarding your appreciation of other cultures?"; (g) "Do you agree or disagree that your personal stereotypes about other cultures have been lessened?" Responses were summed to create an index from five (low level of personal growth) to twenty-eight (high level of personal growth).

The scale for the "future plans" variable was created from the following survey questions: (a) "Do you agree or disagree that your career plans and/or paths of study have changed as a result of your study abroad experience?"; (b) "Do you agree or disagree that you plan to live in your host country or another country abroad in the future?"; (c) "Do you agree or disagree that you will continue study of your host country (or your host country's language) in the future?"; (d) "Do you agree or disagree that you will return to your host country in the future?"; (e) "Do you agree or disagree that you have tried to teach someone about your host country?" Responses were summed to create an index from four (low level of study abroad affecting future plans) to twenty (high level of study abroad affecting future plans).

The scale for the "American pride" variable was created from the following survey questions: (a) "How much have you changed regarding your sense of patriotism?"; (b) "How much have you changed regarding your appreciation of American culture?"; (c) "Do you agree or disagree that American values are better than the values of your host country?" Responses

The mean for the dependent variable "world awareness" was 7.04. This signifies that respondents had a slightly higher than average level of world awareness after their study abroad experience. The mean for the dependent variable "acceptance of others" was 9.33. This means that respondents had a higher than average level of acceptance of others after their study abroad experience. The mean for the dependent variable "host country bond" was 14.09. This means that respondents had a generally high level of host country bond after their study abroad experience. The mean for the dependent variable "personal growth" was 20.54. This signifies that respondents showed a generally high level of personal growth after their study abroad experience. The mean for the dependent variable "future plans" was 14.91. This means that respondents had a higher level of change in their future plans as a result of their study abroad experience. The mean for the dependent variable "American pride" was 5.70. This means that respondents had an average level of American pride after their study abroad experience.

Table 2 presents the frequencies for various individual survey questions that helped determine the dependent variables.

Table 2 about here

Seventy-six percent of respondents, or 78 people, reported large or very large change regarding the question, "How much have you changed regarding appreciation of other cultures?" The question, "How much have you changed regarding your understanding of your host country culture?" received eighty-nine percent of respondents saying they experienced a large or very large change. Seventy-one percent of respondents experienced a large or very large change regarding their appreciation of international students studying at Butler. Seventy-eight percent of respondents replied large or very large change to the question, "How much have you changed regarding your confidence in making friendships with people from another country?" Overall,

The dependent variable of “host country bond” resulted in a statistically significant coefficient for the independent variable of years studied language. This signifies that the more an individual studied their host country’s language prior to departure, the less bonding that took place with the host country. This disproves Hypothesis 1, as the opposite of the hypothesis proved to be true.

Table 4 continues with the regression for the dependent variables of personal growth, future plans, and American pride.

Table 4 about here

The dependent variable of “American pride” showed a statistically significant coefficient with the independent variable of housing. This shows that as housing arrangements abroad changed from a high level of contact to less direct contact with the culture (from host family to university-based housing to an apartment with other Americans), American pride increased as well.

Hypotheses 2, 4, 5 and 6 did not result in statistically significant coefficients, and are therefore unconfirmed.

Discussion

The results suggest that students who participated in a study abroad program experienced high rates of acceptance of others, host country bond, personal growth, and a high level of change in future plans due to their experience abroad. Similar to Boyd’s study (2001) where participants demonstrated increased global awareness and more positive attitudes toward other cultures, the current study finds that participation in a study abroad program enhanced participants’ acceptance of people from other countries, understanding of different cultures, and

This suggests that if a student was surrounded by other Americans in their living arrangements during their study abroad experience, they were more likely to think American values were better and have a higher sense of patriotism. However, those who had more contact with a native family, such as in a host family situation, were more likely to think their host country values were better than American values and have a lower sense of patriotism.

Overall, the study in general suggests that many positive effects, personally as well as culturally, can come from participation in a study abroad program. More than three-fourths of the participants experienced a large or very large change regarding their appreciation of other cultures, appreciation of international students studying at Butler University, and their confidence in making friends with people from other countries. Similarly, more than three-fourths of participants agreed that their stereotypes about other cultures had been lessened, that they felt a bond with their host country, and almost all agreed that they plan to return to their host country in the future.

Although this study indicates positive benefits of study abroad programs, one of the limitations of the research is its use of self-analysis and perceived change. Because of the nature of the study, changes were only recorded as the participant perceived them, rather than an outside person analyzing the behavioral and mental changes of the participants. Another limitation is the sample size. A more comprehensive study could perhaps be conducted at a larger university to better examine the effects of study abroad programs on a larger scale.

Suggestions for further research include a gender comparison of how males change regarding cultural perceptions after a study abroad experience as compared to females. Another suggestion would be to examine how study abroad programs contribute to foreign language acquisition as opposed to learning a foreign language in a classroom setting without the study

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Mean and Standard Deviation

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Years of language study	2.92	1.10
Credit hours	1.73	1.62
Housing	.65	.69
Travel outside host country	1.85	1.06
Prior travel to host country	.30	.46
Prior study abroad	.35	.48
World Awareness	7.04	2.63
Acceptance of others	9.33	2.01
Host country bond	14.09	3.31
Personal Growth	20.54	5.25
Future Plans	14.91	3.30
American Pride	5.70	2.79

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Frequency

	0: No change	1: Very small change	2: Small change	3: Large change	4: Very large change	Prefer not to answer
Appreciation of other cultures	2.9% (3)	1.9% (2)	18.4% (19)	35.0% (36)	40.8% (42)	1.0% (1)
Understanding of host country culture	0.0% (0)	2.0% (2)	8.8% (9)	29.4% (30)	59.8% (61)	0.0% (0)
Confidence in meeting new people	4.9% (5)	4.9% (5)	22.3% (23)	35.9% (37)	31.1% (32)	1.0% (1)
Appreciation of international students at Butler	4.9% (5)	2.9% (3)	20.4% (21)	31.1% (32)	39.8% (41)	1.0% (1)
Confidence in making friends from another country	4.9% (5)	4.9% (5)	11.7% (12)	44.7% (46)	33.0% (34)	1.0% (1)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Frequency Continued

	0: Strongly disagree	1: Disagree	2: Neutral/ No opinion	3: Agree	4: Strongly agree
I now pay more attention to world news.	4.0% (4)	6.1% (6)	26.3% (26)	52.5% (52)	11.1% (11)
I feel my personal stereotypes about other cultures have been lessened.	1.0% (1)	4.0% (4)	31.3% (31)	48.5% (48)	15.2% (15)
I have tried to teach someone about my host country.	0.0% (0)	1.0% (1)	9.2% (9)	49.0% (48)	40.8% (40)
I feel a significant bond with my host country.	5.2% (5)	2.1% (2)	9.3% (9)	44.3% (43)	39.2% (38)
I will return to my host country in the future.	1.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	8.2% (8)	27.6% (27)	63.3% (62)
I will continue study of my host country (or my host country's language) in the future.	1.0% (1)	4.1% (4)	13.3% (13)	34.7% (34)	46.9% (46)
I plan to live in my host country or another country abroad in the future.	4.1% (4)	15.3% (15)	27.6% (27)	25.5% (25)	27.6% (27)
I think American values are better than the values of my host country.	11.2% (11)	39.8% (39)	36.7% (36)	9.2% (9)	3.1% (3)

Table 3. Regression of World Awareness, Acceptance of Others, and Host Country Bond

	World Awareness		Acceptance of Others		Host Country Bond	
	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
Years of language study	-.23 (.39)	-.10	-.06 (.25)	-.04	-1.46** (.49)	-.52
Credit hours	-.23 (.33)	-.14	.06 (.20)	.07	-.31 (.39)	-.16
Housing	-.32 (.71)	-.08	-.15 (.45)	-.07	-.32 (.87)	-.07
Travel outside host country	.66 (.48)	.24	.14 (.30)	.09	.04 (.58)	.01
Prior travel to host country	-.012 (.84)	-.00	.23 (.52)	.08	-.34 (1.02)	-.05
Prior study abroad	2.50** (.86)	.45	.07 (.53)	.02	.94 (1.03)	.14

Table 4. Regression of Personal Growth, Future Plans, and American Pride

	Personal Growth		Future Plans		American Pride	
	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
Years of language study	-.52 (.77)	-.13	-.77 (.42)	-.33	.39 (.37)	.18
Credit hours	-.38 (.62)	-.14	-.37 (.34)	-.23	-.48 (.30)	-.32
Housing	.09 (1.39)	.01	.14 (.76)	.04	1.48** (.67)	.42
Travel outside host country	.81 (.92)	.17	-.62 (.50)	-.22	-.71 (.45)	-.27
Prior travel to host country	-.67 (1.62)	-.07	-.71 (.90)	-.13	1.01 (.79)	.20
Prior study abroad	1.15 (1.64)	.12	.31 (.92)	.06	-1.16 (.80)	-.22

Survey

1. What semester did you study abroad?

Spring 2007

Fall 2007

Spring 2008

Fall 2008

Spring 2009

Fall 2009

2. Through what program did you study abroad?

Butler University Exchange Program

ISEP

IFSA-Butler

Butler's Alcalá Program

Other

3. If applicable, what is the name of the host university you studied at?

4. Were your classes primarily taught in English or a foreign language?

English

Foreign language

If foreign language:

4a. What language were your classes taught in?

4b. How many years did you study this language before going abroad?

0

1-2

3-4

5-6

7+

5. Was your program a direct enrollment program or a program specifically for Americans?

Direct enrollment program

Program for Americans

- Interest in current global events
- Understanding of host country culture
- Self- confidence
- Communication skills
- Respect for those different from myself
- Confidence in meeting new people
- Appreciation of international students studying at Butler
- Confidence in establishing friendships with those from another culture
- Interest in politics
- Sense of patriotism

12. On a scale from 0-4, please respond to the following statements. After my study abroad experience....

- I now pay more attention to world news.
- I feel my personal stereotypes about other cultures have been lessened
- I now identify more with my host culture than I did before
- I try to incorporate some of the customs of my host culture into my own life
- I am more conscious of American customs and traditions
- I think the culture of my host country is better than the culture of America
- I have tried to teach someone about my host country
- I am now more empathetic toward immigrants in the United States
- I feel a significant bond with my host country
- I will return to my host country in the future
- I will continue my study of host country (or host country's language) in the future
- I plan to live in my host country or in any country abroad in the future
- My career plans and/or paths of study have changed as a result of my study abroad experience

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