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Does Housing Influence the Gaining of Cultural Intelligence?

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Abstract

This study seeks to better understand the potential relationship between housing offered to sojourners while enrolled in study abroad programs and their development of cultural intelligence. Former sojourners of study abroad programs offered by one private Northwest university were the participants for this study (n = 74). This study issued the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) to assess participants self-identified cultural intelligence compared to the housing of their study abroad program. Participants completed the Likert scale CQS before answering qualitative questions regarding the program they were enrolled in and their housing during their sojourn. This study found no statistically significant results between cultural intelligence and the housing of sojourners while abroad.
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Introduction

Study abroad programs around the country are encouraging students to broaden their understanding of the world via studying and living in a different country for a set amount of time. The goals for many of these programs are to enrich the lives of students while also helping students cultivate a new view of the world that they are living in by experiencing other cultures first hand. As Nadine Dolby (2004) wrote, “Study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself – particularly one’s national identity – in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self” (p. 150). One of the most important aspects of any study abroad program is the level of immersive opportunities it provides to its participants.

Often, simply living in a new culture is not enough to garner cultural competence (Neuliep 2015). Instead, the sensitivity to other cultures is frequently cultivated through interactions study abroad participants have with both the culture as a whole and individuals living in that culture (Shiri 2015). Only when participants are fully integrated with a culture can students be able to form cultural intelligence and sensitivity. Before offering its own study, this paper examines existing research about study abroad programs, the role of immersion within such programs, and what is known about participants’ cultural understandings after being enrolled in these programs.

Study Abroad as Experiential Learning

Since study abroad merges traveling abroad and continuing a formal education, study abroad experiences can be seen as experiential learning, or a way to bridge key
concepts taught in the classroom with the concrete experiences of what happens in real life. This approach of merging taught materials with real life experiences is also referred to as extended classroom experiences (Katula & Threnhauser 1999). Study abroad programs often are geared towards students who wish to take what they are learning in the classroom and actively apply these lessons while out in a new culture, such as learning Spanish in order to better understand the culture of Spain. Because of the learning experiences open to students participating in study abroad programs, these programs can lead to appreciation and understanding concerning the complex nature of intercultural communication (Levine & Garland 2015). The act of studying abroad is often referred to as a sojourn, “a temporary stay abroad for a specific purpose such as academic study” (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001, p. 142).

Experiential learning is knowledge created through real-life experiences (Kolb 1984, p. 38). David A. Kolb outlines experiential learning as being comprised of four factors: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. These four factors, which merge concrete learning with a student’s transformative and applied learning processes, are what make certain experiences, like a sojourn abroad, count towards an extended classroom experience. Building off of this research, Katula and Threnhauser (1999) found that study abroad cannot be considered experiential learning as outlined by Kolb’s four factors. They argue that since study abroad experiences vary so greatly in both content of the programs’ studies and of the students’ first hand experiences, one cannot apply experiential learning to study abroad since students may not be actively engaged in merging learning and experiences. This could be due to the lack of full immersion in some study abroad programs and students
not being required to actively reflect on their experiences (stage two in Kolb’s model). Due to the variability in both the program design itself and an individual student’s level of engagement; Katula and Threnhauser do not believe study abroad programs as a whole can count towards experiential learning.

**Immersion within a Host Country**

The issues of differing immersive experiences within study abroad programs have been studied in depth as a way to see how effective these experiences are in students living and understanding their host cultures. One aspect of immersion variability is the housing offered to students enrolled in these programs. The types of housing offered to participants can be crucial aspects to how they adapt to a culture and interact with members of that culture. Theoretically, the more immersive the housing experience, such as through homestays or through dormitory housing with students of that culture, the more culturally beneficial the experience should be, rather than living with fellow Americans in place.

Study abroad programs can be structured very differently, with some programs striving to fully immerse their participants within a culture while other programs are structured similarly to students’ home campuses. Study abroad programs can either be run directly through a stateside campus or through outside programs not overtly affiliated with one particular university. A potential risk for study abroad enrollment through direct enrollment via stateside universities (known as Island Study Abroad programs) is that they essentially transport students stateside to a new culture with very limited immersive opportunities (Scally 2015). Programs like the Island programs often house participants in dormitories with other American students, leading to limited interaction with
individuals native to that host country. The programs most successful in cultivating intercultural competence with study abroad participants often were programs where housing involved being housed near or with native students or through homestays with native families (Vande Berg & Paige 2009). These experiences are often more immersive in that a participant will have direct access and communication with individuals who are from that particular culture, not just other Americans living in that culture.

**Cultural Competence**

One of the main goals for study abroad is to allow students to learn while in a previously unknown culture. Ideally, students will leave their host culture coming away with competence relating to the cultures these students have just lived and studied in (Vande Berg & Paige, 2009). Students who elect to study abroad can significantly increase their intercultural competence by participating in study abroad programs (Watson, Siska & Wolfel 2013). As laid out by Karen Van der Zee and Jan Pieter Van Oudenhoven (2013), intercultural competence is comprised of five factors: cultural empathy, open mindedness, social initiatives, emotional stability, and flexibility. These five factors, according to the researchers, will help to determine whether interactions between a sojourner and a cultural native are communicatively effective for both parties, though primarily focuses on whether the sojourner was able to adapt their own communication for this intercultural interaction.

Many different factors play a role in the cultivation of cultural competence. Cultural competence does not come through just learning the native language or studying the country’s history; instead, it comes through comprehending the norms, rules and expectations that lie within that culture that may not be overtly evident (Ting-Toomey
and Chung 2012). Acquisition of cultural competence can occur through three different dimensions: culture shock, psychological adaptation and interaction effectiveness (Chen 1992). According to Chen, these three factors played a large role in the adaptability of a sojourner as an assessment of cultural competence. Having strong communication adaptability lead to better adjustment, with better adjustment facilitating the acquisition of competence within that culture. The process of acculturating in order to acquire cultural competence is often a stressful time period for sojourners, leading to symptoms of culture shock (Neuliep 2015).

While a stressful time, many sojourners, after their time abroad, return and report higher levels of intercultural competence compared to their peers who have not lived abroad. Sojourners who were abroad between 3 and 12 months rated themselves as having a higher awareness of both self and culture after returning from their time abroad (Martin 1987).

**Assimilation to a Host Country**

The primary goal for most study abroad programs is to offer participants the opportunity to learn about a culture while simultaneously living within that culture. It is often that observations students’ have within a culture becomes the strongest indicator for engagement within that culture. Observing a culture first hand through interactions and situations can lead to cultural sensitivity due to these observations altering behavior to suit what might be required of these situations. If sojourners are able to understand the differences of these situations with situations they experience in their home countries, the ensuing behaviors may be altered to adapt to these cultural situations (Levine & Garland 2015).
Schartner (2015) found that many students lacked intercultural competence through non-development of cultural empathy and open-mindedness. Her study found that post-graduate students studying abroad in the UK often felt removed from their British peers due to lack of social interaction. The lack of interpersonal relationships with fellow British students could have prevented an immersive experience for the sojourners, leading them to develop incomplete intercultural competence. Schartner’s research can be applied to study abroad programs as a way to further integrate immersive experiences for students’ abroad in order to cultivate intercultural competence through ensuring students’ will interact with other native students abroad.

Immersive homestay experiences also prove to be beneficial for study abroad students studying in a country where English is not the native language. For instance, acquisition of the Arabic language proved to help students gain more knowledge of the Arabic language and culture due to frequent contact and day-to-day interactions with their host families and through developing a social network within their host country (Shiri 2015). Study abroad participants also frequently remark that their homestay families would serve as the first point of contact for them in their host culture, meaning that cultural intelligence acquisition often began in the home of a native family (Grieve 2014).
Rationale

In all, successful immersion into a new culture through study abroad programs depends on a variety of factors. One factor is the students themselves and their openness to learn and adapt to their new environment (Scally 2015). This openness could be self-initiated openness, or could occur through programs that are designed to provide students with the most culturally minded experience possible (Vande Berg & Paige 2009) Another factor that can affect gaining cultural knowledge resides in the level of immersive opportunities for sojourners while abroad, including their housing. Students may acquire more cultural intelligence if they are directly involved with relationships with people originally of that culture, such as in homestays, compared to living with peers from their home country (Shiri 2015)

*RQ: Does study abroad housing placement influence levels of cultural intelligence amongst returning students?*

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study were students enrolled and alums who were previously enrolled in at least one study abroad program offered by a private Northwest US university. A total of 110 individuals started the survey, although only 74 completed it and were accepted as participants based on their enrollment in a study abroad program at this particular university. Of the 74 participants, 92% were female, 56% of participants sojourned at the age of 19, and 52% of participants are now 23 years and older. The programs that garnered the most responses from participants were London semester and Salzburg year programs, each of which had 14 former participants respond to the survey.
Procedure

Participants for this survey were recruited through social media postings and through word of mouth references. Participants were not compensated for their time. The participants of this study were asked to fill out a self-report online survey regarding the acquisition of cultural intelligence during their time as sojourners. The survey was comprised of questions from the Cultural Intelligence Scale regarding how they identify themselves on a Likert scale for cultural knowledge. In addition to the Cultural Intelligence Scale, participants also were asked qualitative questions relating to the specific program they studied abroad with and the housing accommodations for the duration of their stay, along with their satisfaction with that housing placement.

Measure

To measure students’ levels of cultural competence after their study abroad programs, the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) was administered to the participants. The CQS is a 20-scale self-report survey looking at the four different aspects of cultural intelligence: the metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral levels of cultural intelligence. Van Dyne, Ang and (2005) developed the CQS as a way to measure these different levels of cultural intelligence, which can reveal the capability of sojourners to be able to adjust in culturally different settings. In its creators’ initial (2005) testing the subscales earned Cronbach’s alpha scores of .71 for metacognitive cultural competence; .85 for cognitive, .75 for motivational, and .83 for behavioral cultural competence. Cronbach’s alpha scores in the current study were very similar: .75 for the metacognitive subscale; .84 for the cognitive subscale; .78 for the motivational subscale, and .82 for the behavioral subscale. The overall measure achieved Cronbach’s alpha of .89.
Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in cultural intelligence scores across types of housing experienced while abroad, $F = 1.2, p = .32$. A subsequent $t$-test that compared “stayed with a host family” against all other housing conditions combined (e.g., resided in apartments or dormitories) similarly found no significant difference in cultural intelligence scores between those conditions, $t = .30, p = .76$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see if there was a relationship between a sojourner’s housing arrangements while studying abroad and their cultivation of cultural intelligence. Past research has found a potential relationship between physical closeness with cultural natives and sojourners increasing intercultural competence (Grieve 2015; Scally 2015; Shiri 2015). This study issued a survey containing the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) to previous study abroad participants at one private Northwest university.

The CQS was found to be reliable, so the lack of statistical significance may lie within the independent variable of study abroad housing. Some factors that could have attributed to this lack of a significant relationship include the study’s participation size, the limitations of studying only one particular university’s study abroad programs, and the lack of inclusion on time spent abroad.

This study’s focus relied on studying the various study abroad programs in one private Northwest university. Because of these limitations, people who either had not studied abroad before or not through this particular university were automatically excluded from taking this survey. The exclusion of these potential participants removed
any differences that other universities’ studies abroad programs could have while also not accounting for individuals who have never studied abroad, a factor that could offer further insight into whether study abroad programs as a whole are beneficial in attaining intercultural intelligence. Another factor that could have played a role in cultural intelligence outside of housing was a participants’ duration while abroad, which this study did not incorporate. Participants were asked which program they enrolled in, but the relationship between time and cultural intelligence was not studied. There could be a relationship that was not explored in this study that could correlate levels of cultural intelligence with the length of a sojourn (Martin 1987).

Implications

The lack of statistical significance within this particular study suggests that housing programs may not have a large impact relative to other factors on developing cultural intelligence. Research prior to this study found that homestay housing with native families are a beneficial foundation for sojourners studying abroad (Scally 2015; Vande Berg and Paige 2009), which in turn can produce a stronger knowledge of that culture (Shiri 2015). Programs where students are simply transplanted into a culture without steps to ensure they are well assimilated with cultural natives prove to not be as beneficial for students (Vande Berg and Paige 2009). Despite this research, this study did not find any discerning difference between types of housing and cultural intelligence from former sojourners. This suggests that for this particular university, housing may not be a large factor in determining how students identify themselves as culturally intelligent. This sample size of this study was not large enough to make assumptions about the relationship between housing and cultural intelligence as a whole.
Future Research

More research is required in order to identify what relationship, if any, types of housing have on cultural intelligence for sojourners. A larger and more nuanced study could potentially identify relationships among these factors and others affecting cultural intelligence, like the duration of a sojourn. In all, due to the rates of study abroad participation across the country, more research should be done in order to identify what components of study abroad programs provide students the best opportunity for acculturation and the development of cultural intelligence.
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