The Effects of Short-term Study Abroad on Expanding Students' Culture Perception and Identity

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The ability to interact effectively with other cultures in the workplace is becoming increasingly important. As such, it is crucial to train students who later enter the workforce to be culturally competent. In this study, an opportunity arose to study students completing week-long study abroad trips with an experiential learning component. Open ended responses revealed interesting results about outsider perceptions of students' home culture. Viewed as a pilot study, results are important for showing the importance of week-long service-learning study abroad trips and implications for development of a student's cultural identity as they enter the workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to interact effectively with other cultures in the workplace is becoming increasingly important. Notably, a recent Pew Research survey predicted that by the year 2055, there will be no racial or ethnic minorities in the United States (Cohn and Caumont, 2016). Another study indicated that the racial lines are diminishing since the number of multiracial people is increasing due to immigration and interracial marriage (Lee and Bean, 2004). Additionally, among millennials in the United States who are

the focus of this proposed study, 43 percent are non-white which is a sharp increase from diversity in baby boomers born before 1980 (Cohn and Caumont, 2016). These trends help to explain the increasing need for competence in interacting with other cultures. A multitude of studies has been done examining ways to increase diversity awareness in workplaces and to help employees navigate working with other cultures while abroad (Alhejji, Garavan, Carbery, O'Brien, & McGuire, 2016; Barak, 2016).

However, what has not been examined extensively as a way to increase cultural competence in the workplace is through experiences as a student which may change one's identity and perceived ability to interact with other cultures. In support of this notion, work in this area has been recently been suggested through the use of study abroad or similar programs for university students (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). A few studies have shown that international experience enhances young graduates' employability skills and benefits students who seek an international career (Di Pietro, 2019; Potts, 2015). Specifically, studying abroad also increases intercultural adaptability, intercultural sensitivity and creative thinking (Williams, 2005; Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012). In this pilot study, the effects of experiential learning related short-term study abroad programs at the University of Cincinnati will be examined with regard to career readiness, ethnocentrism, identity, and cultural competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working with other cultures is an important skill. For example, those undertaking international assignments or working as expatriates are a different breed of employees. Their experiences can affect performance, incur cost to organizations, and increase turnover intention (vander Heijden, van Engen, & Paauwe, 2009; Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, & Taniguchi, 2009). In particular, inability to be culturally flexible has been associated with more turnover in expatriates (Stahl, et al., 2009). This is a significant issue in the workplace and has been a focus in recent years (Lee, Chua, Miska, & Stahl, 2017; Morris and Robie, 2001). The ability to perform well in an international environment is also important for leaders and experiential learning has been one way suggested to help employees develop leadership skills internationally (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009).

One reason why employees on international assignment or those who are expatriates do not always perform adequately, could be due to identity incongruence. Identity congruence has been studied in particular with expatriates who may have difficulty integrating into another culture (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). Study abroad programs have been associated with better ability to function in the workplace domestically with those of different backgrounds and also in international business assignments (Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004).

However, what has not been studied extensively are ways to minimize identity incongruence in the workplace for example, with expatriates or employees on international assignments through study abroad or experiential learning programs. In a recent study on the topic of expatriates and incongruence of identity, it was suggested for future studies to examine how past cross-cultural experiences can shape how employees fare working with other cultures later in their career (Kraimer et al., 2012). Short term study abroad programs have been studied for example in a case study by Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011). However, the case study was not in the context of experiential learning where work is done with other cultures.

Recounting certain events by way of storytelling or with narrative methods, can help with forming an identity related to an event. This is known as narrative identity and has been studied in clinical psychology literature for use during therapy (White and Epston, 1990). In this study, it is argued that study abroad programs allow students to not only learn about another culture and increase desired global workplace behaviors, but it also may decrease the amount of identity incongruence felt by employees working with cultures other than their own. It is proposed that this occurs due to how students have a lessening of ethnocentric identity after participating in study abroad programs. Ethnocentrism involves having perceptions of negative attributes for outgroup rather than in group members (Hewstone and Ward, 1985). This has been studied specifically in the workplace where managers were perceived to have

lower amounts of competence if they were in a different cultural group to a participant observing their managerial behavior (Neuliep, Hintz, & McCroskey, 2005).

Lower susceptibility to identity incongruence later in one's career due to participation in study abroad programs could also be fostered through interacting with those from other cultures through experiential learning. The basis of experiential learning is derived from the original theories of learning proposed by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. John Dewey's theory of experiential learning involves a feedback loop of judgment, observation, and previous knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 2014). The result is a way to learn from experience and make decisions.

Lewin's model describing learning is also based off of a feedback loop where an individual learns through experiences by observing them, forming a theory about the experience, and applying the theory to new situations (Kolb, 2018). Piaget's model does not use a feedback loop. Instead, his theory focuses on stages of development that differ ranging from early childhood to adulthood. As an individual progresses through the stages, material is learned through the application of schemas, or theories about how the world works, to new experiences.

The theories of experiential learning by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget are all contingent on actively applying previous knowledge or schemas to new events and experiences. More recently, researchers have defined experiential learning as "A dynamic view of learning based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction. It is a holistic theory that defines learning as the major process of human adaptation involving the whole person." (Kolb 2012)

There are a number of short-term study abroad and experiential learning opportunities available to students at the University of Cincinnati. One example of a short-term study abroad program is offered through the Psychology and Organizational Leadership departments which allows students to work under the direction of locals at a coffee farm in Guatemala. Rather than providing services to individuals in Guatemala, students are managed by local farm workers who gain managerial experience while giving students the opportunity to learn in a unique setting. This provides students with experiential learning opportunities while possibly lessening ethnocentrism felt by students, some of which who are traveling abroad for the first time.

One way that has been proposed to encourage experiential learning during study abroad programs is to ask students to reflect on their experiences (Roberts, Conner, & Jones, 2013). This proposed way to encourage experiential learning is related to narrative identity by way of recounting one's memories in narrative form. Identity is a flowing experience that can change based off of the social situation one is in (Fuss, 2014; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007).

To capture those flowing and fleeting experiences that make up one's identity, recounting events can help reinforce changes that were experienced or bring out portions of one's identity that an individual may not have considered previously. For example, younger and older individuals have been compared using narrative identity methodology to determine how they perceive defining memories, showing that those who were over the age of 65 focused more on stability and those who were younger focused more on change that had happened in their lives (Abes et al., 2007).

Taken together, based on topics of ethnocentrism, the possible benefits of short term experiential learning, and narrative identity, the following are three hypotheses based on topics of ethnocentrism and identity with relation to short term study abroad programs.

H1.1: Students participating in experiential learning while abroad will feel better equipped to work with other cultures while employed later in life.

H1.2: Short term study abroad experiences will be associated with a decrease in reported ethnocentrism scores in students.

H1.3: Recounting experiences before and after studying abroad in narrative form will strengthen students' ability to interact with members of other cultures through lower ethnocentrism scores.

METHOD

At the University of Cincinnati, 32 students were asked to fill out a questionnaire related to their spring-break study abroad trip. There were 26 female and 6 male participants. Twenty three of the participants were Caucasian while the other nine were not. Participants included students traveling on study abroad trips in the Psychology, Organizational Leadership, and related departments at the University of Cincinnati. Most of these studies abroad trips were unique in that they were short experiences over spring break with a component of experiential learning similar to other spring break options that can be found with a cursory online search.

The students were given a questionnaire to complete two to three weeks before their spring break study abroad and they were given another questionnaire two to three weeks after their spring break study abroad experience. The questions were related to the student's own identity, their perception of their culture, other cultures, and how they felt they would work with individuals of other cultures while employed later in life. The questionnaire also included quantitative measures related to ethnocentrism and self-perceived employability. There were no significant differences between before and after study abroad experiences with regard to quantitative results. However, at the end of the survey were qualitative written responses which were detailed and seemed viable for further analysis.

With qualitative responses, a coding dictionary was created to categorize the results. This was done by finding common themes in the students' responses and keeping a count of how many times each themed occurred through both the pre and post study abroad questionnaires.

RESULTS

Responses were coded and revealed themes according to suggestions related to work done by (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) in a loose grounded theory approach. As this is a pilot study, a full grounded theory approach would be employed for future work.

Overall, there were several differences between pre and post qualitative responses which can be found in Table 1:

Students were more aware of multiple identities present after their trip.
Slightly more negative outsider perceptions of student's home culture were found.
Slightly greater appreciation of culture differences and positive perception shift were found.
More reports were noticed related to self-reflection and understanding of other cultures.

Regarding the codes that emerged from qualitative responses, self-identity refers to mentions of a single identity such as 'Asian' for example that the student mentioned in their responses. Multiple identities refer to the amount of identities that students felt that they held. Such identities could be 'student', 'traveller', 'African American', or other similar identities. If a student mentioned multiple identities, it was noted as a code as a way to understand if students felt they had more identities after finishing their experience abroad. Outsider perceptions refer to how students perceived that individuals from other cultures might perceive the culture that the student came from. The theme of perception shift refers to a general sense of change before and after the study abroad experience. Similarly, the self-reflection theme was noted if a student began to reflect on their experience in a general sense.

The following are some examples of responses from these themes:

Identity related response: "I would consider myself to be the typical middle-class younger generation white American"

Outsider Perceptions: "I think we can be perceived by others as ignorant and selfish"

Cultural Differences: "I have come to realize is how much I absolutely love culture!"

Self-reflection: "I remember leaving and feeling sorry for myself, being judgmental, a brat…"

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF THEMES

Time 1			
Self-Identity		**Outsider's Perceptions**	
Self, Single Identity	12	Outsider Negative	8
Self, Multiple Identity	2	Outsider Neutral	0
Negative Self-Identity	2	Outsider Positive	3
Positive self-identity	1	**Self-reflection**	6
Perception Shift		**Cultural Differences**	
Positive	1	Opposing	0
Neutral	1	Appreciation	8
		Indifference	2
		Cultural Acceptance	14
Time 2			
Self Identity		**Outsider's Perceptions**	
Self, Single Identity	11	Outsider Negative	12
Self, Multiple Identity	9	Outsider Neutral	2
Negative Self-Identity	0	Outsider Positive	4
		Self-reflection	12
Perception Shift		**Cultural Differences**	
Positive	4	Opposing	0
Neutral	3	Appreciation	14
		Indifference	1
		Cultural Acceptance	12

CONCLUSION

This research seeks to study the relationship between university study abroad programs where experiential learning takes place and its effects on eventual ability to interact effectively with coworkers from other cultures. The ability to interact effectively, also known as cultural competence, has been widely studied (Almutairi, Dahinten, & Rodney, 2015). However, what has not been determined empirically are ways of encouraging that ability before entering the workforce through identity research (Greatrex-White, 2008; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009). This research is both significant and innovative because it seeks to show the outcomes of experiential learning and study abroad programs in a unique way through identity research.

The approach taken with the qualitative method used in this study is important because it examines narrative identity. Narrative identity has been studied in various other fields such as in clinical psychology or political psychology (White and Epston, 1990; Almutairi et al., 2015). It involves the use of short stories or narratives provided by participants on the basis that a story can help reinforce memories of an event and help form one's identity. In the case of this study, a new identity could be formed as a result of students' experiences as that of openness and willingness to work with other cultures and this could be explored further in future research due to how mentions of more identification were found after study abroad experiences.

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