

A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of Alfred University

The Effects of Study Abroad on Undergraduate Students' Cultural Sensitivity

by

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The Effects of Study Abroad on Undergraduate Students' Cultural Sensitivity

With the advances that allow nations from around the globe to easily share the world today, this study seeks to determine if students who have studied in a country not their own can expand their way of thinking to include the values and ways of life of a foreign host.

Collectivist and individualist are ways that the cultures around the globe are classified. Collectivism is a point of view that emphasizes interdependence between people. Collectivism often stresses group goals as a priority over individual goals. Collectivist societies would believe that focusing on the community, society, or nation is more important than focusing on individuals. Some examples of collectivist countries include Portugal, India, China, and Japan. In contrast, individualism is the point of view that the interests of the individual should be more important than the goals of the group. Individualistic societies often oppose government interference and believe in self reliance and independence. Some examples of individualistic countries include the United States, England, and France (Encyclopædia Britannica Online).

Intercultural sensitivity, for the purposes of this study, refers to “people's understanding of the different ways they can behave depending upon whether they are interacting in an individualistic or a collectivist culture, their open-mindedness concerning the differences they encounter in other cultures, and their flexibility concerning behaving in unfamiliar ways that are called upon by the norms of other cultures” (Bhawuk, 1992, p. 2).

Many students study abroad with the intention to learn about and understand the behavior and point of view of others. It is important to examine if study abroad programs are actually

having this effect on students. This study looked at how studying abroad affects cultural sensitivity in undergraduate students. The study also looked at how visiting either an individualistic or collectivist country influences individualistic and collectivist thinking. I hypothesized that students who had studied abroad would have higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. I also hypothesized that students who visited collectivist countries would have higher collectivist thinking scores and lower individualistic thinking scores. For those who visited individualistic countries, I hypothesized the opposite; they would have higher individualistic thinking scores and lower collectivist thinking scores.

This study had 88 students who had either studied abroad or had not studied abroad. They were tested to determine their levels of cultural sensitivity and whether studying abroad is predictive of individualist or collectivist thinking style, based on the type of culture that was visited. The Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992) was the test used for this study. This test gave students three scores: one for cultural sensitivity, one for collectivist thinking, and one for individualistic thinking. The participants completed this survey online.

Surprisingly, the results did not support my hypotheses. There was no real difference found in the levels of cultural sensitivity between students who had and had not studied abroad. This could imply that study abroad courses are not teaching students what they are thought to be, in relation to intercultural sensitivity. With these findings in mind, preserving the educational value of study abroad courses, in the area of cultural sensitivity, may require more explicit instruction either here or abroad. It may be beneficial for universities to offer more study abroad courses based on psychology programs, because psychology programs could focus directly on instructing students on intercultural sensitivity.

There was also no statistically significant difference found in individualistic and collectivist thinking based on the type of culture the students visited. However, there were some non-significant differences that were the opposite of what I had predicted. Students who visited collectivist cultures had higher scores for individualistic thinking and lower scores for collectivist thinking. The students who visited individualistic countries had scores that were about equal for both types of thinking. A possible explanation for this could be that visiting a country with a culture that is the same as their own (i.e., individualistic) did not challenge the thinking styles the students already had. On the other end, visiting a culture opposite of their own (i.e., collectivist) could possibly have caused students to identify more strongly with their own culture.

However, it is very possible that the results of this study were affected by the fact that there were so few participants in the study. To determine whether this did, in fact, affect the results, it would be necessary to replicate the study with more participants. Also, future research should be done to test for additional confounds within the study. Knowing how studying abroad affects intercultural sensitivity and thinking styles could help colleges to better structure study abroad programs to better help students to open their minds to new experiences and points of view.

The Effects of Study Abroad on Undergraduate Students' Cultural Sensitivity

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Abstract

This present study investigated how study abroad affects cultural sensitivity and individualistic and collectivist thinking. I compared 88 students who had and had not studied abroad on their levels of cultural sensitivity, and investigated whether studying abroad was predictive of individualist or collectivist thinking style. Results suggest that there is no real difference in levels of cultural sensitivity or in thinking styles between students who had and had not studied abroad. This could suggest that study abroad courses are not meeting the objectives they are often thought to be. With these findings in mind, preserving the educational value of study abroad courses, in this area of intercultural sensitivity, may require more explicit instruction either here or abroad. It may be beneficial for universities to offer more study abroad courses based on psychology programs, because psychology programs could focus directly on instructing students on cultural sensitivity.

The Effects of Study Abroad on Undergraduate Students' Cultural Sensitivity

Liberal arts education programs often endorse students becoming well-rounded individuals. Psychology programs specifically tend to put emphasis on learning about and understanding the behavior and point of view of others. Many college students study abroad during their education as a way to experience and better understand new cultures. However, it is important to examine if these programs are having the effects they are assumed to have.

Many past studies have looked at how study abroad experiences affect the way that people view these other cultures and, while a few have found more neutral results, the findings are overwhelmingly positive that these experiences do impact students' views of other cultures. Study abroad trips have been shown to help students to be aware of and challenge their own beliefs and biases while also becoming more aware of, and open to, others' values and points of view (Lindsey, 2005). These experiences abroad have also been reported to help students to look more critically at the culture of their home country (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Not only do these trips help students to become more open minded to other cultures and ways of thinking, but they also have been found to help students become less stereotypical in their views of other cultures. After studying abroad, students are more likely to base their feelings about people from another culture on individual characteristics instead of broad stereotypes (Drews, Meyer, & Peregrine, 1996).

Study abroad trips have also been shown to help prepare students to work more easily in future multicultural environments, compared to peers who did not study abroad (Kitsantas, 2004). In fact, there have even been studies that found that trips as short as nine days long can have these same effects on cultural adaptability (Mapp, 2012). These findings suggest that both long and short-term study abroad trips can have very positive effects on students.

However, despite these findings, very little research has been done that looked at the effects of the type of culture the students visited. Specifically, there seems to be no research regarding the relationship between the type of culture the person visited, collectivist or individualist, and whether or not that experience affected their own style of thinking in terms of individualist or collectivist identity. This study investigated that gap and also compared students who had and had not studied abroad on their levels of cultural sensitivity. I hypothesized that students who had studied abroad would have higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. I also hypothesized that those students who studied abroad, especially those who studied in countries with a culture that is opposite of their own, collectivist instead of individualist, would have a less individualistic and more collectivist view point.

Method

Design

This study used a 2x2 non-experimental design. The independent variables were whether or not the participant had studied abroad and, if so, what type of culture, individualistic or collectivist, they studied in. The dependent variables were the three scores calculated from the scale (i.e., individualistic thinking, collectivist thinking, and overall cultural sensitivity) that each participant received on the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). These variables were analyzed separately.

Participants

Participants for this study were 88 undergraduate students who were either introductory psychology students or students who had been a part of the study abroad program. The students were recruited in two ways. Students taking introductory psychology were recruited through posting a sheet for the study on the experiment recruiting board. This sheet had tear-away strips of paper with a website to visit. These students received 1 research credit in their psychology class for participating. Study abroad students were recruited through an email asking them to participate from either the study abroad office or the teacher with whom they went on their study abroad trip. The researcher did not directly contact the students, as a way to help maintain the confidentiality of these students. The email included a link to the survey. These students received a chance to win a raffle prize of one of two \$20 Visa gift cards. Students were recruited in both the fall and spring semester of the 2014-2015 school year. The students were all born in the United States and were of average college age. Five students were eliminated from the analysis because they did not fit the criteria of having been born in the U.S. Overall, 23 of the participants had studied abroad and 65 had not.

Materials

The survey used in this study was the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). This instrument was found to have a reliability of $r = .84$ (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). This measure consists of 30 Likert-type items designed to assess the person's levels of intercultural sensitivity and levels of individualist and collectivist thinking (Appendix A). The measure originally consisted of 45 questions. However, the version used for this study was somewhat altered from the original. Question 29, now reads: "Chinese influence is threatening the national identity of many Asian countries" (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). This question

originally asked about the USSR. This change was made to make the question relevant to today's world. Also the original version of this survey repeated the first half of the test. This was not done in the current study because I was looking to see if the participants' natural levels of individualistic and collectivist thinking had been altered by studying abroad, and not just if they were able to change their thinking style when asked. These changes were made after discussion with the survey's creator through email (R. Brislin, personal communication, October 1, 2014). The participants could receive a score of 0-16 for both individualistic and collectivist thinking individually, and a score of 0-14 for overall intercultural sensitivity. A high score indicates a higher level of each, while a low score indicates a low level of each.

I asked some additional questions of the participants including, "Where were you born?" and, "Have you ever studied abroad?" The questions "If you have studied abroad: What country did you travel to?", and "How long did you study abroad?" were also asked. The last additional question was "How many times have you traveled outside of your home country for purposes other than study abroad (vacation, work, etc.)?" (Table 1 & Appendix B). The website esurveypro.com was used to administer the survey.

Procedure

After receiving the link to the website either from the recruitment sheet (Appendix C) or through email (Appendix D), the participants who were recruited went to the website and were asked to give consent to participate in the study. The informed consent form explained what would be asked of the participant, as well as explaining that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. This was also how they entered their name to receive either class credit or a chance to win the raffle prize. If they gave consent to participate in the study, they were able to access the survey. The participants were also asked to answer a few questions to gain basic

demographic information, such as, what country they went to during their study abroad experience, how long they studied abroad, if they have traveled outside the country besides studying abroad, and if they are originally from America. After completing the survey, participants received a debriefing statement. I then scored each participant's survey. Each participant received three scores: one for collectivist thinking, one for individualist thinking, and one for over all cultural sensitivity.

Table 1. Results For Demographic Questions Asked

Studied in Independent culture	17 Students Most commonly France, Germany, Italy and England
Studied in Collectivist culture Countries Studied in and number of students	6 Students Cozumel, Grand Caymen, Brazil, Pargue, Chile, Cozumel, Roatan, Grand Cayman, Belize, Argentina, Vietnam
Did not study Abroad	65
Traveled for non-study abroad	17

Results

The data were analyzed using a 2x2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with type of culture studied in as the independent variable and collectivist and individualistic thinking scores as the dependent variables. Based on Roy's largest root, there was no significant effect of Type of culture studied in for individualist and collectivist thinking scores $\Theta(2, 20) = .174, p = .20$

(Figure 1). This means that the second hypothesis was not supported. Compared to participants who did not study abroad ($M= 9.15, SD= 1.53$), those who did study abroad ($M= 9.73, SD=1.98$) were not found to have higher cultural sensitivity scores, $t(85) = 1.454, p=.106$ (Figure 2). This result also does not support the hypothesis. The correlation between time spent abroad and cultural sensitivity score was also found to be non-significant $r = -.10, p =.457$.

Figure 1. Individualistic Vs. Collectivist Thinking Scores For Students Who Studied Abroad In Either Individualistic Or Collectivist Cultures

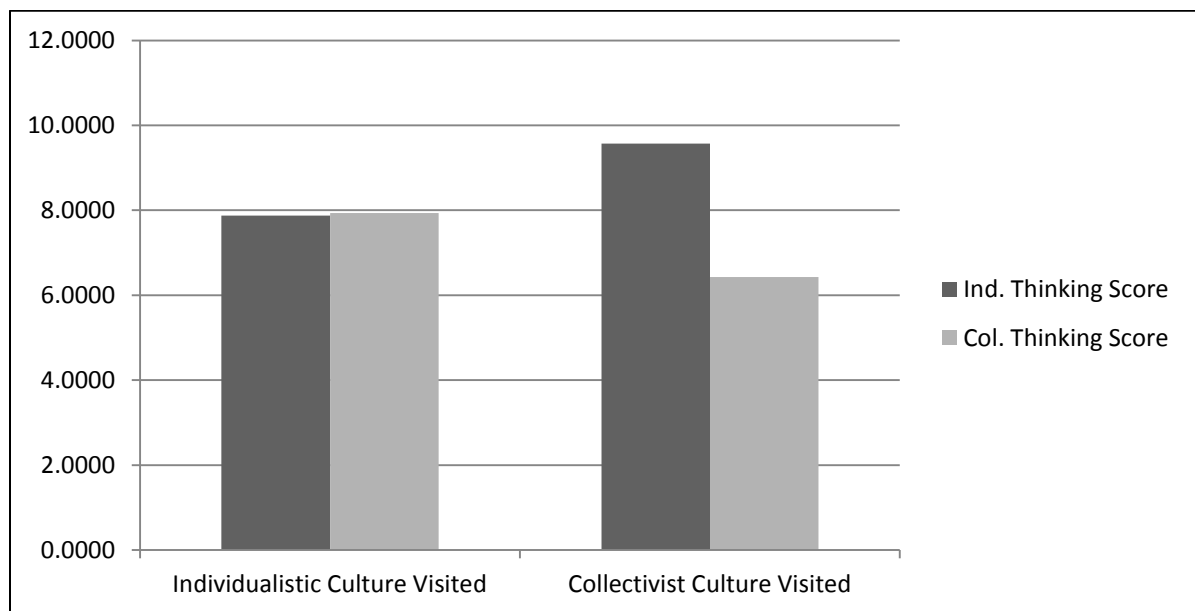
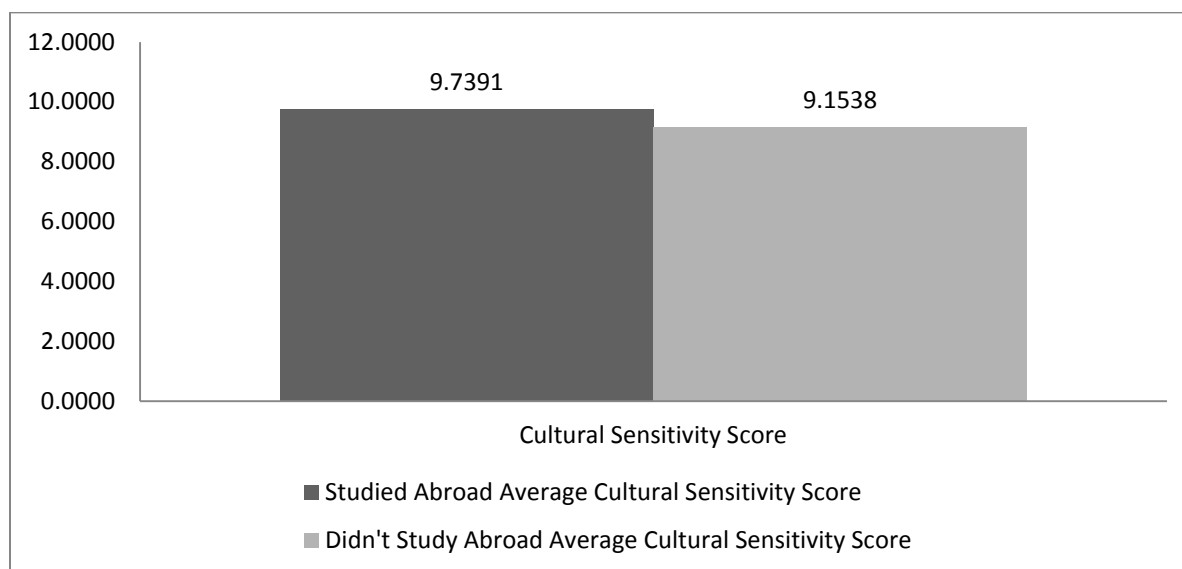


Figure 2. Average Cultural Sensitivity Scores For Participants Who Have And Have Not Studied Abroad



Discussion

Results suggest that there is no significant difference in levels of cultural sensitivity or in thinking styles between students who have and have not studied abroad. These findings did not support previous research in this area and did not support my hypotheses. However, at a non-significant level, collectivist thinking scores for those who visited collectivist cultures were actually lower than the scores of those who had visited individualistic cultures. Participants who visited individualistic cultures had scores that were about the same for both styles of thinking.

These results, though non-significant, are interesting because they are opposite from what I hypothesized. A possible explanation for these results is that visiting a country with a culture that is the same as their own (i.e., individualistic) did not challenge their previously existing styles of thinking, and so students stayed at the same level that they existed at previously. On the

other end, visiting a culture opposite of their own (i.e., collectivist) could possibly have caused participants to identify more strongly with their own culture, explaining the higher individualistic thinking scores and the lower collectivist thinking scores. However, the study had a very limited number of participants, especially in the number of students who had studied abroad, and specifically in collectivist cultures. The study also used convenience sampling by using students from only one university.

Another potential limitation is that the measure used was altered from the original format in how it was given. The Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992) included 45 questions and originally repeated the first set of questions and asked participants to imagine they were in a collectivist culture (i.e., Japan). This was not done in the current study, which may have affected the power of the measure. These limitations may have influenced the results found in this study.

Further studies could seek to repeat this study with a higher number of participants and a more diverse sample, including more study abroad students. This should be done to see if these results can be replicated. It would also be beneficial to use a pre-test/ post test method for the study abroad students. This would help to determine if the participants actually had any change in thinking style or level of intercultural sensitivity. Also, sampling both study abroad and non-study abroad students from all class years as participants to control for the possible effect of time spent at a university would be beneficial. Finally, asking all participants if they would like to study abroad if they have not yet done so, may help to determine if participants' scores are influenced by the person already being interested in studying abroad rather than being influenced by the trip itself.

The contrary findings of this study could suggest that study abroad courses are not meeting the objectives they are often thought to be. With these findings in mind, preserving the educational value of study abroad courses, in this area of intercultural sensitivity, may require more explicit instruction on this subject either here or abroad. One way to do this may be for universities to offer more study abroad courses based on psychology programs, because psychology programs could focus directly on instructing students on cultural sensitivity. Talk about use of instrument.

Reference

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- 7) _____ If I want my subordinates to perform a task, I tell the person that my superiors want me to get that task done.
- 8) _____ I prefer to give opinions that will help people save face rather than give a statement of the truth.
- 9) _____ I say `no' directly when I have to.
- 10) _____ I define the other person's status by paying attention to name, gender, age, and other demographic attributes.
- 11) _____ To increase sales I would announce that the individual salesperson with the highest sales would be given the "Distinguished Salesperson" award.
- 12) _____ I enjoy being emotionally close to the people with whom I work.
- 13) _____ It is important to develop a network of people in my community who can help me out when I have tasks to accomplish.
- 14) _____ I enjoy feeling that I am looked upon as equal in worth to my superiors.
- 15) _____ I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact.

- 16) _____ If I want a person to perform a certain task I try to show how the task will benefit others in the person's group.
- 17) _____ When I am living abroad, I assess situations as quickly as I do when I am living in my own country.
- 18) _____ I get upset when I do not get a letter or call from my close friend(s) for more than a month, when I am living abroad.
- 19) _____ Given acceptable hygienic conditions, I would not mind if my children ate local food at school, when I am living in another country.
- 20) _____ I do not like to receive unannounced visitors at home.
- 21) _____ I do not like custom officers meddling with my baggage at the airport.
- 22) _____ We all have a right to hold different beliefs about God and religion.
- 23) _____ I do not like to meet foreigners.
- 24) _____ It is unusual for people to eat dogs.

- 25) _____ I decorate my home or office with artifacts from other countries.
- 26) _____ Culturally mixed marriages are wrong.
- 27) _____ A woman's place, truly, is at home.
- 28) _____ I would not allow my subordinate to promote his nephew if there is someone marginally better than him. The person who is better must be promoted at all costs.
- 29) _____ Chinese influence is threatening the national identity of many Asian countries.
- 30) _____ While living abroad I spend most of my personal time with people from my own country.

Appendix B

Personal Data Form

Where were you born?

1. In the US
2. In another country

Have you ever studied abroad?

- Yes No

If So:

What country did you travel to?

How long did you study abroad?

1. Two weeks
2. A month
3. A semester
4. A year
5. Other:

How many times have you traveled outside of your home country for purposes other than study abroad (vacation, work, etc.)?

Appendix C

Recruitment Sheet

<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">EXPERIMENT #1; Worth 2 Experiential Credits</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Experimenter: Daniella Stebe DLS4@alfred.edu (contact directly for cancellations)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Johnson, ext. 2854, johnsonbc@alfred.edu Topic/Concepts: Study Abroad Attitudes.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">You may only participate in this study once.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Date: Monday 3/16/2015- Friday 3/27/2015 This is an online survey.</p>
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
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<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
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<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
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<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	
<p>http://www.eSurveys.Pro.com/Surveys.aspx?id=3462a292-abbf-4944-bab7-e62550d0de75</p>	

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Hello! My name is Daniella Stebe. I am conducting a study on attitudes about study abroad for my Independent Study. I am hoping that those of you receiving this email will help me to complete my study by taking this short survey below:

<http://www.eSurveysPro.com/Survey.aspx?id=3462e292-abb5-4944-bab7-eb2550b0fe75>

I hope that you choose to take part in my study. If you choose to do so I truly appreciate it.

Thank you

Email for second trial:

Hello! My name is Daniella Stebe. I am conducting a study on attitudes about study abroad for my Independent Study. I am hoping that those of you receiving this email will help me to complete my study by taking this short survey below:

<http://www.eSurveysPro.com/Survey.aspx?id=3462e292-abb5-4944-bab7-eb2550b0fe75>

NOTE: PLEASE DO NOT take this survey if you have already completed it at another time!

I hope that you choose to take part in my study. If you choose to do so I truly appreciate it.

Thank you.