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Making it Real: The Impact of a Short-Term Study Abroad Experience on Students' Ethnocentricity & Views of Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Short-term study abroad experiences have been found to increase cross-cultural awareness and overall student growth and decrease ethnocentrism, though studies are lacking. The benefits of short-term experiences may only surface through qualitative measures, not quantitative. The goals of this study were to assess the impact of a short-term study abroad experience on students' ethnocentrism and views of meaning in life. Six undergraduate students from Portland, Oregon, studied in Cape Town, South Africa, in the spring of 2012, and participated in this study. They took a 3-credit course, Global Perspectives on Psychology, as well as completed 3 credits of practicum through volunteering with local social service agencies and hospitals. Part of the program also included visiting local museums and other sites of interest in the Cape. Students' ethnocentricity and views of meaning in life were measured before and after this experience. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions at baseline and follow-up. Data were analyzed for significant differences between pre- and post-surveys via paired t-tests. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data also was completed. Results showed that there were no significant differences in pre- and post-measurements in the total scores on the measures, though two individual items showed significant differences pre and post. With a small sample size, significant differences are challenging to find statistically. However, qualitative data indicated considerable change from baseline to follow-up. Students' ability to understand other cultures was improved, gains in global understanding were reported, studying had a considerable impact on learning, and an increased desire to create change in the world was endorsed. Short-term study abroad experiences offer several benefits to undergraduate students. Such experiences seem to have an important place in undergraduate psychology programs, both with regard to applying knowledge and broadening perspectives.



Introduction

The formal assessment of study abroad experiences has been lacking. Some studies have shown the benefits of study abroad trips, including short-term formats (e.g., Bollag, 2004; Borden, 2007; Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007). Such experiences have been found to increase cross-cultural awareness and overall student growth and decrease ethnocentrism. The benefits of short-term experiences may only surface through qualitative measures, not quantitative (Mapp et al., 2007). The goals of this study were to assess the impact of a short-term study abroad experience on students' ethnocentrism and views of meaning in life.

Method

Six undergraduate students from Portland, Oregon, studied in Cape Town, South Africa, and participated in this study. They took a 3-credit course, Global Perspectives on Psychology, and completed three credits of practicum through volunteering with social service agencies and hospitals. Part of the program included visiting local museums and other sites of interest. Students' ethnocentricity and views of meaning in life were measured before and after this experience. The Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale (GENE; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) was administered in its entirety. Also, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was given (Steger et al., 2006), and the Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI, Kelley & Meyers, 1995) was administered. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered at baseline and follow-up through open-ended questions.

Method (continued)

Data were analyzed for significant differences between pre- and post-surveys via paired t-tests. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data also was completed.

Results

Two individual items showed significant differences pre and post. On the MLQ, the item, "My life has no clear purpose," showed a significant decrease from baseline ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.38$) to follow-up ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.52$), $t(5) = 2.91$, $p = .034$. The effect size, calculated with partial η^2 , was 0.63. Additionally, item 13 on the CCAI, "I like to try new things," significantly increased from baseline ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.98$) to follow-up ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 0.55$), $t(5) = -3.16$, $p = 0.025$. The effect size, calculated with partial η^2 , was 0.67.

Qualitative data indicated considerable change from baseline to follow-up. Students' ability to understand other cultures was improved, gains in global understanding were reported, studying had a considerable impact on learning, and an increased desire to create change in the world was endorsed:

- "Instead of reading, hearing, writing about other cultures, we are fully experiencing it which completely submerges you into the emotions and understanding of a different culture so you can see things through a different perspective."
- "I will be HIGHLY advocating to others to experience other countries and to step out of the box. Only good can come from it – both to you and those you help."

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Results (continued)

- "This experience impacted my attitude by making it real. When reading about it or learning by looking in you don't get the same type of experience compared to physically being there. Being there makes it real, unforgettable, and something worth remembering."
- "I think that being an observer of how others behave and do things...shows differences and similarities and also is a huge learning experience on what the world is like and how important it is to pay attention to the ways people who seem so different than us live and experience life."
- "Self-experience is so much more effective and educational in being able to truly understand."
- "My eyes have been opened to the ways of South African culture and to not always think America's way is the best way."



Results (continued)

- "This trip made me see the importance of learning about things/issues globally. It made me appreciate what I have and see the many things that I need to improve on."

Conclusions

Short-term study abroad experiences offer several benefits to undergraduate students. Positive benefits appeared in qualitative measures more than quantitative. An increase in sense of purpose and trying new things was present following this study abroad experience. Such experiences seem to have an important place in undergraduate psychology programs, both to apply knowledge and broaden perspectives.

References

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