The Role of Studying Abroad in Female College Students’ Changing Perception of Self and Other

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Abstract

This study examines how studying abroad changes a student’s perception of themselves and their perception of another culture during a semester abroad. I conducted four in-depth interviews of University female students who traveled to four different countries (Italy, England, Spain and France). Each participant shared their experiences about their expectations, misconceptions, and outcomes abroad. Participants were asked to discuss fears, culture shock, how they have changed, how their perceptions on cultures have changed, and future advice for other students. Positive results from the participant’s interviews show that each participant had very different experiences abroad but all experienced some form of change within themselves and how they viewed different cultures. Each participant’s experience showed her a new perspective on herself and on cultures. The study uses Social Constructionism, which is a grounded theory, to interpret the findings between communication and perception of self and of the culture. Overall, this study is an in depth analysis of how fears and culture shock influenced the changed perceptions of self and of culture among my participants.
Studying abroad has increased over the years among many college students. It not only offers a chance to explore a new part of the world, but it also increases self-awareness and cultural awareness, which is important in today’s global economy. Studying abroad is an amazing way to connect with others and learn about the world through real experiences. Through intercultural communication, we can bridge the gap between cultural stereotypes, misconceptions and reality. Being aware of other cultures brings many opportunities to young college students. This is something I find important for my generation and I want to add to the research in the field explaining how studying abroad affects students’ outlook on the world in a powerful way.

I have always been interested in traveling to new places and experiencing new cultures. I have grown up traveling with my family all over the world and this sparked my interest for my research topic. I decided to conduct my research on the changes a student experiences regarding themselves and other cultures throughout their semester abroad. I will be interviewing females who have studied abroad for a semester as part of their undergraduate experience. I chose this topic because I wanted to speak specifically to my American, White and female generation to be able to compare the similarities and differences females have going abroad. Females often have a different perspective then males when it comes to traveling, their safety, outlook on cultures, and overall experience and therefore, I want to focus on these issues.

**Literature Review**

A lot of research has been dedicated to studying the experiences people have when they integrate themselves into a new culture. In this literature review, I will be discussing three primary topics of research that have been studied in the past: alcohol consumption, sexual harassment, overall experience, and how it relates to the Social Learning Theory.

**Alcohol Consumption**

Scholars have long been interested in studying the impact alcohol consumption has on college students. Past literature sheds light on how alcohol affects students studying abroad. Two previous studies found that alcohol consumption not only increased during a student’s time abroad,
but also upon reentry to the United States. This is useful for my research because alcohol plays a
major role in the overall travel experience and decision-making process for the student. Secondly,
females who consume alcohol while abroad are more likely to be placed in negative situations.
How alcohol affected the experience negatively and positively was also examined.

A study done by Pedersen, Neighbors, and Larimer (2012) examining the impact of
sojourner adjustment and drinking motives on alcohol consequences experienced by Americans
studying in foreign countries looks at how sojourner adjustment and drinking motives are
associated with alcohol-related consequences. This study looked at 201 females studying in a
foreign country around 22 years of age. Measures for the present study included demographic
information, alcohol use behavior, alcohol-related consequences, drinking motives, and a measure
of sojourner adjustment. Results found that approximately one third reported no consequences
while abroad, one third reported between one and four consequences, and one third reported five or
more of the 39 consequences assessed. Both negative sojourner adjustment factors (social
interaction with co-nationals, homesickness/feeling out of place) predicted increased rates of
alcohol related consequences while abroad. Individuals who engage with the social environment
may have less difficulty adapting to life abroad and therefore use alcohol in a moderate (or
culturally appropriate) manner and do not experience multiple consequences, whereas those who
spend the majority of their time with other Americans and feel out of place may be at increased risk
for drinking consequences.

The second study that was done on alcohol consumption while abroad conducted by
Wiekiewicz & Turkowski, (2010) focused on alcohol consumption upon reentry to the United
States from their abroad program. 421 females answered questions from the Reentry Shock Scale
(Seiter & Waddell, 1989). The Reentry Shock Scale has 16 items, rated on a 7-point Likert-type
scale, developed from previous culture shock and reverse culture shock research. These results
indicate that study abroad increases alcohol consumption. Most study abroad programs are in
countries where the legal drinking age is 18; it may be difficult for some to readjust to American
norms. Overall, drinking in a foreign country and upon reentry to the United States increased. I found the studies done by Wiekiewicz et al. and Perderson et al. useful for my research because it gives me information on the role alcohol plays in studying abroad. The studies conclude that alcohol has a significant impact on students who are traveling abroad.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is an important topic to address, since is a prevalent occurrence for foreigners traveling abroad. There are quite a few factors that play into sexual harassment including alcohol, cultural differences, and safety. Many women worry about the different sexual harassment experiences they may encounter prior to their trip abroad, whether it be a college student studying in a foreign country or an adult female traveling for work. The following four scholarly articles analyzed females and the sexual harassment they experienced abroad.

Kimble, Burbridge, and Flack (2013) did a study on what risks increased sexual assault in female undergraduates. The sample consisted of 218 junior and senior females who had studied abroad within the past two academic years. The core of the survey focused on three types of sexual assault: nonconsensual sexual contact, attempted sexual assault (oral, anal, or vaginal), and completed sexual assault (oral, anal, or vaginal). Eighty-three participants reported some type of unwanted sexual experience while abroad. Sixty women reported at least one experience of nonconsensual sexual contact (“unwanted touching”) while abroad. Thirteen reported an attempted sexual assault (either oral, anal, or vaginal), and 10 reported completed sexual assault (either oral, anal, or vaginal). Overall, 89% of the unwanted sexual experiences were reported to be perpetrated by nonstudents, local residents (in comparison with other students). From this study we are able to gain knowledge that legal access to alcohol for the first time may increase drinking rates—a known risk factor for sexual assault. Implications of this study imply that American students abroad may also be targeted either because they are perceived as sexually available or less likely to go to foreign authorities if they are sexually assaulted, and the placement of many study abroad programs
In major cities throughout the world may explain the increased risk of assault by nonstudent residents.

Rawlins (2012) researched sexual harassment among American women studying abroad in 18 different foreign countries. The data for this study is drawn from in-depth interviews with 18 undergraduate women who have participated in study abroad. Although they participated in structured programs of classwork and had assistance in securing housing, they felt very much alone and apart from their usual social support networks. Faculty and families especially stressed issues of safety and security. However, none reported receiving information about public harassment or stereotypes of American women. About half of the students interviewed remarked that men regularly breached personal space boundaries during their interactions abroad and that normative differences in social interaction made them feel uncomfortable. Almost all of the young women interviewed reported experiences they thought of as public harassment, mostly involving catcalling or unsolicited comments from men in public.

The studies done by Kimble et al. and Rawlins, both display the ways that American women are treated in foreign countries. Although the Kimble et al. and Rawlins studies differ in that former is quantitative and the latter is qualitative, results still show that American females regularly experience sexual harassment. This is important for my subsequent research in order to understand what can happen abroad for female Americans and to compare what experiences took place for participants depending on the country they were in.

Napier & Taylor (2002) studied 91 women professionals in Japan and 53 in China to learn about what experiences they encountered in these foreign countries with sexual harassment. They conducted workshops, seminars or focus groups with women working in each location, in part to gather more data, but more importantly to begin to test their findings' and get the women's reactions to their tentative results. In this study one of the most surprising findings to them occurred in Japan, when they realized the pervasiveness of sexual harassment of foreign (primarily younger) women professionals by Japanese men. Almost every woman they talked to in Japan had
a story of harassment. Typically Japanese men (in higher positions than the women) got drunk and made passes. While nothing serious ever occurred, the frequency with which this emerged, as an issue was astounding. This study shows that there is a correlation between sexual harassment and alcohol consumption. This is something I will indeed want to see if my participants experienced both together.

Ono, & Piper, (2004) conducted a research study of 105 Japanese women who relocated to other parts of the world to study at a university. Results show that many Japanese women experienced difficulties integrating into the culture and therefore experienced sexual harassment with males in the foreign country. The study also shows that the Japanese women experienced the highest level of sexual harassment when they could not associate easily with the cultural norms from the foreign country. The research predicted that this was because the most foreign women seem the easiest to “take advantage of” and therefore has the most sexual experience encounters.

Results from the four studies consistently show that sexual harassment increased among females when they were in a foreign country. This connects back to my own research I plan on addressing sexual harassment in my own research. Scholars agree that sexual harassment and alcohol consumption largely impact the experience a student will have. I can use the data to help me see how the two interconnect among my participants.

Scholars have long examined college students as for why they chose to study abroad and their level of satisfactions with the overall experience. Scholars have also applied the Social Learning Theory to students studying abroad in attempts to understand students’ expectations and experiences abroad. The next three studies address these issues.

Nyaupane, Paris and Teye (2010) conducted a study in order to gain a better understanding of the driving force behind students’ motivation to study abroad and how they ultimately narrowed down the destination to one place. They surveyed 136 study abroad participants from an American university. These students were all undergraduates planning to study abroad for a full semester in Europe. The surveys included questions about personal family ties, previous travel experience,
motivations, and attitudes toward destinations. From their research they concluded that 93% of students had traveled before, 38.6% had relatives living in the country they planned to study abroad in, and 45.7% knew people in other countries. From this study I gathered that a majority of students who travel abroad have had previous travel experience or know someone internationally.

Tying this research back to females, Chieffo & Griffith (2009), conducted a study in which they tested both male and female students’ levels of satisfaction during their time abroad and compared them to one another. The survey was anonymous, but given to both males and females separately. The results concluded that 71.8% of females reported that they were satisfied with their study abroad program thus far, while only 28.2% of men were satisfied. I would like to probe this number further by conducting a study that tied together expectations and outcomes of traveling abroad for females.

McLead & Wainwright (2009) conducted a study using focus groups to examine how study abroad program experiences affect psychological outcomes. According to McLead & Wainwright, “a key component of Social Learning Theory, expectancies, fits nicely with the ideas offered by Engle and Engle (1998), who proposed categorizing programs to inform students about what to expect from their study abroad experience, with the hope that matching expectancies with realities would lead to a more positive experience” (p. 67). Social Learning Theory proposes that people see a connection between what they do and what happens to them. Therefore, according to Social Learning Theory, individuals’ prior perspectives combined with their expectancies about studying abroad will in turn determine how they behave and how much they enjoy their experience. McLead & Wainwright conducted a focus group in Scotland where the participants were in the last week of their study abroad programs. There were a total of 44 students, 23% male and 17% female. Their results concluded that there were four themes: (1) students experienced stressful situations that violated expectancies; (2) successful experiences led to feelings of increased self-confidence; (3) successful experiences led to changes in self perceptions (4) successful experiences led to changes
in student’s perceptions of the world (McLead & Wainwright). Their findings reveal that expectancies, both met and unmet, greatly related back to how the students judged their experience.

Strengths from the articles I have found is that they focus on how the individuals’ experience was changed over the semester. From the studies done by Nyaupane et al, Cheiff, and McLead I found that students have prior traveling experiences and expectations about their experience. This is important because my study looks at how those have changed. I can connect this to the studies done on alcohol (Wiekiewicz et al. and Perderson) and sexual harassment (Kimble, Nieper, Rawlins, and Ono) by seeing what experiences and expectations were met and how those changed over the semester for my participants. All the studies supported that traveling abroad lead to new experiences that changed a person. Whether the change was good or bad, the general consensus was that studying abroad is impactful.

Previous literature has done an excellent job looking at multiple perspectives of abroad experiences many people encounter. There are qualitative and quantitative studies that range from focusing on alcohol consumption among college students abroad to sexual harassment among females in the workplace abroad. Although these topics are of importance, they do not truly connect the dots for why these types of situations occur. For example, prior expectations of a culture influence the overall experience and my study examines that. Secondly, the studies do not dig deep into what factors lead to these types of experiences. My study will examine how culture and perception of self influence these experiences.

Through my study I aim to find out how their abroad experience changed their perspective on themselves and on other cultures. I posed the following research question: How has your semester abroad changed your outlook and perception on yourself and other cultures prior to your experience (Consider your expectations, misconceptions and outcomes you may have had)?

My research question focuses on the experience of the female, and how the foreign experience has impacted their life. Often, one holds stereotypes about other cultures that one does not know anything about and my study will examine how these misconceptions changed for the
person. I want to consider their prior expectations and misconceptions, and how these were either validated or invalidated after the experience. Studying abroad has become more popular for undergraduates over the years so looking at the effects it has on an individual is crucial.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

First, I got in contact with my participants and planned an open-ended, one-on-one interview. I located my participants through mutual friends, Facebook, and the Global Education Center on my college campus. I selectively chose participants who were American, middle class White and female and who had all gone to different countries in order to get a wide range of cultural differences among my participants. I gained the consent of my participants by asking them via a formal consent letter if they were willing to participate in my research study. I did the interviews in a library where it was quiet, with limited distractions. I interviewed a total of four participants. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. After the interviews I decoded and analyzed their responses on my computer looking for similarities and differences pertaining to my research question: How has your semester abroad changed your outlook and perception on yourself and other cultures prior to your experience (Consider your expectations, misconceptions and outcomes you may have had)?

The advantages to using this method are that it was efficient and gave rich data with a lot of detail about each participants’ experience. The responses I obtained explained and visually described my participants experience abroad. This method gave them flexibility to continue telling stories, elaborate, or ask certain questions if they wished and was a simple method that did not require extraneous outside work for the participants. Some disadvantages to this method were that it was time consuming to go through my data and it does not represent an entire population.

The objective of this study is to dig deep into the participant’s experience abroad and understand how their perception of themselves and of cultures changed over the course of the semester. I wanted to learn what made their perceptions change and how they see the world and
themselves differently now. I selectively chose follow-up questions to guide my interviews because it would help me discover pre-study abroad and post-study abroad personal and cultural experiences to ultimately address my research question.

My follow-up questions connect to my research question because they aim to dig deeper into understanding how one’s semester abroad changed their outlook on themselves and other cultures. The follow-up questions are crucial to gather all angles of my research topic. There is flexibility in these questions for students to elaborate on stories and share with me their personal experiences.

**Data Description**

I found that all participants went on their journey abroad with an open mind and confidence in their decision to travel abroad. No one had high expectations except that they were ready to go on their journey. Participants wanted to travel abroad to see the world and experience a culture unlike their own. It was important to each participant not to judge or create expectations and misconceptions for themselves. Although there was fear and culture shock abroad, these feelings were minimized once they adjusted to the culture.

We asked participants about fears and overcoming fears. Audrey stated she initially was fearful that she would not be able to communicate with the locals or be able to simply buy her own groceries. However she later recounts during the interview: “I purposefully put myself in the most uncomfortable situation possible. Those moments are where I learned the most.” Hanna overcame her fears overtime, “I slowly started to adapt to the culture there and fell in love with it. I got used to my new life and my fears went away.” Lindsey overcame her fears of being abducted, managing money and being homesick by realizing that everyone abroad was so nice and helpful. This was a big comfort for her. Dora overcame her fears of being lonely by making close friends with the students on her study abroad program.

Culture shock was another topic I asked about because it would answer how each participant reacted to the culture they were in and what parts of the new culture were the hardest to
adjust to. This connects back to my research question about changed perceptions of yourself and other cultures because the things that shocked them ultimately they had a big impact during their time abroad.

In terms of the culture shock each participant experienced, Audrey said that she “dressed more conservatively going to class.” Dora said, “Everything is really slow paced and I am from LA. They have no understanding of personal space. It was really frustrating. The boys were forward and it was really uncomfortable at times.” Hannah said: “Madrid was a huge city and it was so different to be back in a city again. The biggest culture shock was the school itself. It is so laid back- there is a 2:30 siesta. Dinner isn’t served until 10 pm.” Lastly, Lindsey stated, “You take the tube everywhere. You walk everywhere. The food was different as well. Guys were very respectful and liked taking girls on dates. School was the same, not much difference. The freedom thing was very different. Not having a set schedule you had much more freedom.” Although similarities were found when cross-examining interviews, I have concluded that each individual experienced culture shock in their own way.

I asked participants how they felt their perceptions of themselves have changed after this cultural experience. Audrey said, “I always considered myself very shy and reserved but once I was out in this new place with new people I realized how willing I was to try new things. I no longer see myself as quiet and reserved but instead very outgoing.” Hanna said, “I thought I would be terrible at Spanish and no one would understand me so I thought I should just not even try to speak it, but what I learned was that was not true at all and the more I practiced, the better I got. By the end of the trip I was telling all my local friends only to speak Spanish to me.”

Lindsey recalls that her perception of self changed when she “learned it was impossible to feel lonely in this amazing place with so much culture and interesting people to watch even if I was by myself.” Lastly Dora said, “I thought I would get homesick but I actually did really well abroad and on my own.”
The second part of my research question asks how their perception of the culture changed of the course of the semester. Audrey said: “I expected the culture to be way different but because I fully emerged myself in the culture and learned a lot about daily life. The locals had similar values to myself then I thought they would.” Hannah discovered that, “People were friendly to me even though I was American, I didn’t think that would happen. Being in the culture was so awesome and made me appreciate my own culture and other cultures.” Lindsey learned through her experience abroad that “The friends I made didn’t hold typical American stereotypes; they had an open mind about getting to know me.” The fourth participant, Dora, discovered that Italians loved to do the things she loved to do, “They went to movies, bars, and family dinners. Our lives were very similar.”

Overall participants experienced significant changes in their perceptions of themselves and of the culture. They went in with some expectations of how the people in the new country would act. However, their expectations were not completely accurate; they learned this from immersing themselves in the new culture. The participants had great experiences with locals despite their misconceptions of the culture.

Data Analysis

After collecting and analyzing the data, I was able to successfully answer our research question, how has your semester abroad changed your outlook and perception on yourself and other cultures prior to your experience? (Considering your expectations, misconceptions and outcomes you may have had).

From the data I concluded that people change a lot over the course of the semester. Studying abroad only brings people to have more open minds and become better-rounded individuals. Each participant had entirely different reasons for choosing to study abroad and therefore each expected something different out of their experience but they all were in some way pleasantly surprised by how the culture treated them.
There was a range of different fears that participants had but many of them were ones that the participants easily overcame once they settled into the new culture. Their fears were all due to the fact that they did not know what to expect in this culture and therefore were nervous or worried to be abroad. Participants overcame the fears most commonly overtime and by forming interpersonal relationship with locals. Once they felt comfortable, safe and happy in the new country the fears vanished or were not important anymore.

Culture shock was another important component to answering my research question. Culture shock and fears are related because they both address things that could possibly lead to a negative perception of the culture. Through my data I gathered that all participants experienced some form of culture shock however, it was nothing that held them back from emerging themselves in the culture. Instead it was small things like different foods or different meal times that the participants had to adjust to. My research is evidence that although customs may be different in another country, it is still possible to live with the locals and have an amazing experience.

In my data I learned that each participant felt very changed after their experience. They returned to their home country with a lot of new memories and experiences that impacted their view of themselves. For example, Lindsey learned to do things by herself-something she did not think she would like to do. Many of the participants personally felt they had grown up a lot during their semester abroad. Dora had a fear that she would be homesick abroad however; she learned that it actually was not something to be fearful about. Instead she learned to be independent and make friends with those around her.

Overall, by interviewing participants I was able to compare expectations and misconceptions to how their own perceptions of self and of the culture have changed. One of the common themes among my participants was that they did not have predispositions going into the abroad experience. All participants concluded that the only way to truly immerse yourself into a country is to get uncomfortable. Lastly, the participants explained that the only
way to get the incredible experience is to be 100% embraced in the culture. Do not hold back, do not to be afraid, and certainly do not to come in with any expectations. Following this mindset will allow for perceptions on yourself and other cultures to be fully embraced.

**Discussion**

**Implications**

Participants talked about the things that they did to help them truly immerse in the culture. They offered a piece of advice for others students who plan to study abroad at the end of their interviews. This helped me sum up the experience they got out of their time abroad. The pieces of advice they shared with me are as follows: be willing to try new things, make friends with the locals, have an open mind, and live in the moment.

The theoretical implication for this study is based on social construction theory. Social constructionism is a grounded theory stating that meaning and understanding of the world is not developed solely within the individual, but within the interactions with other human beings (Gergen, 1980). There are two major components to the theory: Humans create a model of the social world by how it functions and rationalize it from this, and language is the most important system humans use to construct reality. The social constructionism perspective was used among my participants in their abroad experience. For example, when Audrey said, “the only way to truly immerse yourself is to get uncomfortable.” Here, she is implying that the only way to understand and learn about the culture is to immerse yourself in the culture. Dora stated, “Live every moment. Take in every sound, every image that you can.” My data shows that my participants were using language to communicate with locals and live on the daily in the new culture. Communication immersion changes oneself and one's perception of one's environment. This perspective is one way to examine the social construction of communication in a foreign country and therefore, this method was used in my research study.

**Limitations**
There are a few limitations to my study. First, the sample size was extremely small; therefore we are only getting a small selection of experiences abroad. Second, I was limited to only gathering one method of data because I could not observe them abroad or be there with them on their experience; I was limited to their interpretation. Third, I had to rely on the participant’s memory of their abroad experience and someone could forget or leave out important information, but I had no way of checking their actual abroad experience. Fourth, I did not have a research partner helping me gather the data or providing a second opinion or input when I was analyzing the interviews. Finally, because I knew my participants prior to the interview, this could have influenced the information they wanted to share because some might not have felt comfortable disclosing certain valuable information to acquaintances.

**Future Research**

Overall, this study is a first step to understanding in depth experiences of students who choose to study abroad. It provides future students with information they can use when they go abroad to make the most out of their experiences. Furthermore, it allows for future research to be conducted at other universities and on males as well. It would be interesting to compare male and female expectations, misconceptions, and experiences abroad. There is still much to be explored in this field. However, I believe our research provides a good beginning to qualitative analysis in this area of study.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion my study is an example of how we all have misconceptions about foreign cultures and we all do not know what to expect when we travel to new places. However, through a semester abroad, our perceptions of a culture will completely change and as human beings we will become more culturally aware of the world and the people in it. The person you are before studying abroad will be very different than the person you are after the journey. Sharing abroad experiences is what will teach everyone to be more open-minded and excepting of other cultures.
Overall, my research findings are significant. They are a representation of how fears and culture shock factor into perceptions of us and other cultures. Each participant experienced fears and culture shock that ultimately lead them to have a changed perception of themselves and of other cultures.
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