



Students' functioning while studying abroad: The impact of psychological distress and loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that experiencing stress while traveling abroad is a rather common occurrence. Students studying abroad at Loyola University's Rome Center during the 2004 fall semester and the 2007 spring semester completed surveys, which examined aspects of psychological distress, loneliness, and functioning while abroad. These studies found that students experiencing more psychological distress and more loneliness demonstrated lower levels of functioning while studying abroad and this relationship was found at different time points in the semester. The results of this study should be reviewed by study abroad programs and used to enhance students' experiences while abroad by providing intercultural training and offering mental health resources for students abroad.

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1. Introduction

Studying abroad is a growing trend in higher education. In fact, over a span of only twenty years the number of students studying abroad has increased from less than 50,000 students in 1985–1986 to more than 240,000 students in 2006–2007 (Opendoors Online/IIIE Network, 2008). A study abroad experience has much to offer students including improved proficiency in a foreign language, greater interest in international affairs, enhanced adaptability, and personal growth, and several studies have documented these benefits (e.g., Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Davidson & Lehmann, 2001–2005; Drews & Meyer, 1996; Hadis, 2005; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; Langley & Breese, 2005; McCabe, 1994; Savicki, Downing-Burnette, Heller, Binder, & Suntinger, 2004). Yet, relatively little research exists regarding the psychological aspects of American students studying abroad, particularly the stress that many students who study abroad encounter. Previous research has done little to address students' mental health and the consequences of psychological stress on students' abilities to function while abroad. Given its potential threat to students' experiences, it is important to understand how stress impacts students' functioning abroad.

1.1. Study abroad and stress

Lazarus (1993, p. 2) has conceptualized stress as “an external load or demand on a biological, social, or psychological system.” Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stressful circumstances as typically new, difficult to predict and unclear, and occurring at the same time as other stressful situations in life, all of which can describe a college study abroad experience. Traveling to a different part of the world, away from family and friends, away from a familiar language, culture, and way of

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life is stressful. This stress, often referred to as culture shock (Oberg, 1960), is experienced to some degree by most travelers abroad. The harmful effects of stress on a person's health have been well studied in the general population, and many physical conditions, such as suppressed immune system and cardiovascular disease, and psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression, have been linked to stress in the general population (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Finlay-Jones & Brown, 1981; Hammen, 1978; Hudd et al., 2000; Kolenc, Hartley, & Murdock, 1990; Nezu, 1986; Rawson, Bloomer, & Kendall, 1994).

Although research has demonstrated the deleterious effects of stress on health in the general population, there have been few empirical studies specifically targeting the psychological variables affecting American students who study abroad. Many of the existing studies have simply been descriptive, identifying psychological distress as a concern for students abroad. Others have focused only on foreign students' experiences while studying in the United States or in other countries. A further limitation in the current literature is that some of the studies have focused very specifically on language acquisition. These studies provide a foundation for further study into the impact of psychological stress on American students abroad.

Some studies have found that, indeed, many students do experience psychological stress while abroad. In a study of Chinese students studying at British universities, Lu (1990) found that the experience of homesickness was pervasive and stable throughout the study while other psychological symptoms were more pronounced early in the study abroad experience and then decreased over time. While some have suggested that students who are from cultures considered to be quite different from that of their host country should experience more stress, studies have actually found evidence of stress while abroad despite the similarity of their culture of origin to that of the host country. Furnham and Trezise (1983) found that foreign students demonstrated significantly higher levels of psychological disturbance than native British students, and they found that European students, who were hypothesized to be similar to British students, did not experience lower levels of psychological disturbance than students from other parts of the world. Sam and Eide (1991) took this a step further when they studied the mental health of foreign students from around the world including students from the United States at the University of Bergen, Norway. They showed that students' mental health declined while abroad and demonstrated an increase in several psychological syndromes including depression, anxiety, paranoia, and somatic problems (Sam & Eide, 1991).

To examine the impact of stress on students who study abroad, a few studies have investigated the relationship between psychological distress and foreign language acquisition. Allen and Herron (2003) performed a study using the framework of Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which states that in order to engage fully in learning a second language, students need to be free of "mental blocks" (e.g., laziness, anxiety, or fear) that may not allow elements of the language to be learned and retained (Krashen, 1985, p. 17). In their study, Allen and Herron showed that students abroad who experienced more anxiety had more difficulty acquiring a second language than students who were less anxious. Another study, this one by Gardner, Day, and MacIntyre (1992), found that students were less motivated to learn a foreign language if they experienced anxiety. Although this discussion is specific to second language acquisition, it may be extended and used as a framework to understand the impact of psychological stress on students' overall functioning while abroad and suggests that psychological stress may also interfere with other areas of functioning.

One study that has examined more general functioning abroad is by Ryan and Twibell (2000) in which they found that 20–30% of the students surveyed disclosed emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and that these emotional difficulties adversely affected students' activity levels while abroad. This study took an important step in linking psychological stress in students abroad with decreased activity level and the possibility that psychological stress can limit or impair students' experiences while abroad. Therefore, students with psychological stress while abroad may not benefit as much from their study abroad experience.

1.2. Study abroad and social support

Another common experience among students who study abroad is loneliness. Since students are typically removed from their usual social support systems when they study abroad, they may feel as though they have few people on whom they can rely for support. Students may also feel detached from the community around them. Research has shown that loneliness can lead to the onset of symptoms of anxiety and depression in the general population (Blai, 1989). On the other hand, social support has been shown to buffer the physical and psychological problems associated with stress and can directly decrease physical and psychological problems (Aneshensel & Stone, 1982; DeLongis et al., 1988; Furnham & Bochner, 1990; Pengilly & Dowd, 2000; Rubio & Lubin, 1986).

Some research exists to extend this concept into the study abroad arena, and several studies have examined the relationship of social support and psychological stress specifically during foreign study. For healthy adjustment to a study abroad environment, a few studies have shown that socializing with other students (Surdam & Collins, 1984), socializing with native individuals (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984), feeling supported by family and program (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992), and having quality relationships are important (Wiseman, 1997). Because loneliness can lead to psychological stress and consequences, the experience of loneliness as a component of psychological stress in students who study abroad must be addressed.

1.3. Goals of the current studies

The goal of the present studies was to extend previous research on the psychological experiences of students abroad by investigating these variables in relation to students' ability to function while studying abroad. Given the many potential

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