Evaluation of ethnocentric beliefs among short-term study abroad student travelers and non-travelers

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To cite this article:

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Evaluation of ethnocentric beliefs among short-term study abroad student travelers and non-travelers

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad programs often lack in formal evaluation practices. Many programs rely on anecdotal feedback from students to support the benefits of study abroad travel. In two studies, the authors examined whether ethnocentric beliefs were influenced among students participating in short-term study abroad programs and whether they differed from students who had no intention to travel abroad. In study one, a paired samples t-test was used to compare pre-travel and post-travel ethnocentrism scores. Post-test scores decreased, but there were no significant differences in ethnocentrism between the pre-travel (M=26.29, SD=7.02) and post-travel (M=25.81, SD=7.45) groups; $t(26)$=0.60, $p = 0.55$. In study two, an independent samples t-test was computed to compare pre-travel and non-travel ethnocentrism scores. There was a significant difference in pre-travel (M=26.29, SD=7.02) and the non-travel groups (M=31.19, SD=8.64); $t(51)$=-2.26 p=.03, and results showed that the non-traveled group scored higher on the Ethnocentrism Scale.

Keywords: *Short-term study abroad, ethnocentrism, student travelers*

Introduction

In 2005, the United States' Congress established the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program. The Commission's (2005) report proposed an expansion of study abroad within American higher education as the next step in increasing access to study abroad experiences. Specifically, the Commission argued students in higher education should engage in study abroad to understand other "lands, languages, and cultures" (para. 5). The goal of the Commission was to reach one million students studying abroad annually by 2017. Although the Commission's work was introduced as the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Act of 2006, it was referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and did not advance. Despite this setback, the work of the Commission gained the attention of American higher education leaders who sought to promote global literacy through study abroad in an era of global trade and interdependence.

Study abroad programs within American higher education have taken on many forms. Exchange programs allow students to enroll directly at a foreign university for a semester or an entire year. Institutions also have formed partnerships with third-party organizations that provide academic programming to students who wish to study abroad. Through these organizations, students may take courses to satisfy major, minor, or elective requirements at their home university. Finally, institutions of higher education have offered faculty-led study abroad experiences for institutional course credit that can range in duration from a few weeks to an entire semester.

As American higher education institutions have embraced study abroad and sought to increase participation in these programs, the question remains whether that participation results in global literacy as intended by the Commission. Specifically, does studying abroad change learners' understanding of other lands, languages, and cultures? Global literacy is a complex construct. Scheuerholz-Lehr (2007) defined global literacy as individuals' "values, belief systems, and behaviors" (p. 183). For this research, we focused only on changes in students' beliefs following participation in a short-term study abroad program. Specifically, we examined students' ethnocentric beliefs.

Ethnocentrism is the "belief that one's own culture is superior" and should be the standard by which all others are regarded (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2005, para 5). According to Hales and Edmonds (2019), ethnocentrism can be related to familial ties and psychological identification as an in-group cultural identification. In-group bias is associated with the we-versus-them mentality and can create a host of negative feelings towards so-called outsiders. Higher ethnocentric beliefs are associated with greater levels of intolerance and discrimination, while lower ethnocentric beliefs are associated with more positive interactions and promote intercultural communications. Xenophobia, which is the prejudice of people from other countries, is a closely related concern and has been a topic of discussion during the pandemic (Kim & Shah, 2020). Xenophobia and ethnocentrism are similar societal dilemmas that create negative perceptions and biases within our population. It is important to understand that high ethnocentric beliefs may make it difficult for students to meet employers' expectations to work in a global environment. Developing global awareness and intercultural sensitivity may allow students to work more effectively in contemporary society by changing their ethnocentric beliefs.

Bizumic et al., (2021) stated that ethnocentrism was originally introduced over 150 years ago and has been a topic of discussion at various points in time depending on global events. More recently, ethnocentrism is a common concern within our global and political climate. Events with new political leaders, immigration, and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought this topic back to the forefront of discussion. When a homogenous group uses its standards to determine what is right and wrong, subjective opinions dominate the group's identity. However, on the other hand, it is important to have a sense of group awareness among a population, as it is important to appreciate group identity, develop social norms, and help foster group collaboration, and success. For example, many organizations spend significant amounts of money to develop a cohesive team, and it is important that they work together and strive for success. Everyone does not have to agree, but they must learn to treat each other with respect to work toward the end goal. For that reason, it is important to think about how differences can be used to build a group that is productive. Studies have shown that groups composed of very diverse individuals can be very creative and generate a larger number of ideas compared to homogenous groups (Paulus et al., 2018).

A new study addressed differences in individualistic and collectivist cultures and ethnocentrism (Muhammad, et al., 2022). Collectivist cultures tend to score higher in ethnocentrism, due to their high level of identification within the group, and interestingly much of the literature focuses on individualistic cultures. It is not that group norms should be seen in a negative light, rather it should be used to understand and appreciate differences among in-group and outgroup contexts. Positive interactions between two heterogenous groups can facilitate understanding of these differences and can help foster acceptance. Therefore, American college students should be exposed to opportunities that foster positive reciprocal relationships to develop in communication within study abroad programs and beyond.

The promotion of global awareness has positive benefits, which include interpersonal skills, intercultural awareness, and communication (Chieffo & Griffith, 2004). These items are associated with collaboration, conflict management, and resolution skills, and are a valuable skill set to develop prior to moving into a career. According to NAFSA (2021), "40% of companies surveyed missed international business opportunities because of a lack of internationally competent personnel" (Section 1) and with the American trade market and the ever-changing population dynamic, there is a growing need to explore ways to develop future employees. Chieffo and Griffith (2004) compared students' intercultural awareness and found that students who studied abroad developed a greater understanding of global awareness and interpersonal skills than those who had not. Employers find these skills to be valuable, and the study abroad experience can help facilitate these competencies.

Cultural Competence and the Workforce

The Commission's (2005) work noted that American higher education institutions play an important role in ensuring an educated citizenry ready to respond to globalization and international economic competition. Faculty and universities are challenged by employers to prepare culturally competent members of the future workforce. Employees who can work effectively with individuals representing diverse backgrounds are expected. Therefore, universities have employed many of the traditional means of helping students understand different perspectives. For example, they offer exposure to speakers, service learning opportunities, and courses that address cultural and diversity issues (Gordon et al., 2019). However, engaging in these opportunities may be ineffective in terms of changing beliefs and

behaviors simply because they are not immersive and transformational. Study abroad programs may serve as an immersive and transformational experience to develop a global perspective and cultural competence.

Rodriguez and Lamm (2016) stated that students may already possess specific views about individuals from other cultures. These views influence how students understand individuals and their cultures. Moreover, views about culture may include beliefs about race. Those beliefs, in turn, shape individuals' attitudes toward others. Attitudes can be positive, negative, or neutral and can be difficult to change. However, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory describes how cognitive and environmental factors interact to influence behavior. In this theory, behaviors can be learned from one's environment through observational learning. Further, mediational processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation help determine the extent to which an individual's observations influence his or her behavior. Social learning theory would predict that direct or indirect experiences with individuals representing multiple races and diverse cultures may influence our understanding of these cultures.

To develop and produce culturally competent graduates who are prepared to enter the workforce and operate productively and respectfully, colleges and universities must continue to identify and develop effective methods for developing students' global perspective and increasing their cultural competence. One way to facilitate this process is to encourage greater participation in study abroad programs. According to NAFSA (2021), only 10% of American graduates have traveled abroad, while 80% of college freshmen are interested. There is a disconnect between those who want to travel abroad and those who participate. Historically, students have the option to participate in year-long, semester-long, and short-term study abroad programs. Short-term, which are classified as 30 days or less, account for almost 60% of all study abroad programs (Kamdar & Lewis, 2015). Popularity related to short-term programs, compared to semester abroad or year-long programs, can be attributed to financial limitations and the inability or lack of desire to travel abroad for an extended amount of time (Mapp, 2012). Students may have family or job obligations that prevent them from leaving home for long periods. Financial obligations play a big factor as well, as year-long programs can cost upwards of $36,000, semester-long programs upwards of $18,000 (Fusco, 2019).

Measuring and comparing ethnocentric beliefs between students who have and have not participated in study abroad provides one way to examine whether such experiences may contribute to the development of global awareness and intercultural sensitivity. In a series of two studies, we examined students' ethnocentric beliefs and participation in short-term study abroad. We focused on students' ethnocentric beliefs because we assumed participation in short-term study abroad experiences or the intention to participate may be associated with differences in measured levels of ethnocentrism.

In study one, we were interested in whether study abroad participation would affect ethnocentric beliefs. Using a pre-test/post-test design to control for individual differences, we addressed the following research question: Does participation in a short-term study abroad experience reduce ethnocentrism? Therefore, this study sought to provide a direct comparison of ethnocentric beliefs before and after a short-term study abroad experience.

In study two, we turned our attention to pre-existing ethnocentric beliefs. Specifically, we were interested in whether a student's ethnocentric beliefs influence their willingness to participate in short-term study abroad. We assumed that students with lower measured

ethnocentrism would be more likely to demonstrate an intention to participate in study abroad than those with higher measured ethnocentrism. Using an independent-groups design, we asked the following research question: Do students who intend to participate in study abroad hold less ethnocentric views compared to students who have no intentions to study abroad? By addressing this research question, we were able to discern whether ethnocentric beliefs may be a factor in discouraging participation in activities like study abroad.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 53 students attending a mid-sized public university in Texas. A majority of the participants were female (47), five were male, and one did not to report. A majority of the participants were White (45), six were Black and two were Asian. The age range was 18-61, with a mean age of 28 and a median of 22.

Materials

The revised Ethnocentrism Scale, also referred to as revised GENE (see Appendix, p. 11), was used to measure students' attitudes and beliefs related to cultural differences. The scale is a 22-item Likert scale that offers five answer choices ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with the statement provided. Out of the 22-items, 15 are scored, seven have been included to balance the number of positively and negatively worded items. Questions four, seven, and nine are re-coded in reverse scoring, and items are added together for a composite score (Neuliep & McCroskey, 2013). Using Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency for the revised Ethnocentrism Scale estimates the reliability to be between .82 and .92. Data related to the revised Ethnocentrism Scale show that the measurement scale is valid, as compared to four other instruments that measure similar aspects of ethnocentrism. The revised scale scores "were statistically and significantly correlated with scores on the Travelling to Other Countries scale, $r(88) = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$, the Working with Foreigners scale, $r(88) = -0.37$, $p < 0.001$, Gudykunst's Ethnocentrism scale, $r(88) = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$, and the Patriotism scale, $r(88) = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$" (Neuliep, 2002, p. 14).

Procedures

For study one we recruited students who were scheduled to travel on short-term study abroad programs. Students were identified from a database system maintained by the university study abroad director, and contacted via university email. Students were asked to participate in a pre-test/post-test survey via email. Prior to traveling, students were given a pre-test survey, which included demographic questions, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and race, followed by the Ethnocentrism Scale survey. Upon return, students were sent the same survey as a follow-up to assess pre and post-test ethnocentrism scores. In study two, we recruited students who had no plans to travel abroad in the future. These students were recruited through a university research system called Sona. Sona is a cloud-based system where faculty can post current and ongoing research studies, and students have access to sign-up to participate in studies at their discretion. Students were asked if they planned to travel abroad, and if so, skip logic was applied and no further information was collected. If students had not planned to travel abroad, they were taken to the same demographic questions and Ethnocentrism Scale items related to study one. We then compared ethnocentrism scores between groups to address the research questions for study one and study two.

Results

Study One

Design. To address the research question, study one examined ethnocentrism before and after travel for a short-term study abroad experience among students enrolled at a mid-sized public university in Texas. Student participants were recruited from those who participated in a short-term study abroad opportunity offered at the university during the 2018 to 2019 academic year. We assumed that participation in study abroad would reduce students' ethnocentric beliefs. The study employed a pre-test/post-test design to test this assumption. The Ethnocentrism Scale was administered one week before departure for the study abroad experience and re-administered within one week after the students returned. The study abroad experience for this sample was 30-days or less.

Descriptive analyses. The range of scores for the Ethnocentrism Scale is 15 to 75 with the scale authors reporting scores of 55 or greater as indicating high levels of ethnocentric beliefs. For the 27 participants, average ethnocentrism scores were low and were similar for both administrations (Pre-Travel: $M = 26.29$, $SD = 7.02$; Post-Travel: $M = 25.81$, $SD = 7.45$).

Inferential analysis. A paired-samples t-test was computed to compare mean ethnocentrism scores for the two scale administrations. The results of the paired-samples t-test confirmed the observation that the two administrations' mean scores were similar. There was no statistically significant reduction in ethnocentric beliefs after traveling for this group of participants, $t(26) = 0.60$, $p = 0.55$.

Study one discussion. Study one addressed the research question: Does participation in a short-term study abroad experience reduce ethnocentrism? An examination of the results of study one showed no reduction in ethnocentrism after participation in a short-term study abroad experience. A close examination of the descriptive statistics for the pre-travel administration of the Ethnocentrism Scale suggested that we possibly had recruited a group of participants who were already somewhat culturally competent as measured by the ethnocentrism scores. Participants' mean scores prior to travel were not low, indicating lower levels of ethnocentrism. That is, we considered the pre-travel scores to represent a floor effect with little room for a reduction in ethnocentric beliefs as a result of our intervention, a short-term study abroad experience. Students who have self-identified to participate in a study abroad experience may already possess less ethnocentric beliefs. This assumption is supported indirectly by Goldstein and Kim's (2005) findings. In their study, students reporting higher levels of ethnocentrism were less likely to participate in study abroad. Because we conducted study one among those students who had already committed to participating in study abroad and who also had low mean ethnocentrism scores, we determined that we may have not included students who would hold more ethnocentric beliefs.

Study two was designed to examine if those who intend to participate in study abroad already hold less ethnocentric views in comparison to those who have no intentions to engage in study abroad.

Study Two

Design. To test our assumption that students who intend to study abroad may have lower levels of ethnocentrism in comparison to their counterparts who never intend to study abroad, we recruited an additional sample of students at the same mid-sized public university in Texas as in study one. Specifically, we recruited an additional sample of individuals who expressed having no intention of engaging in study abroad. We administered the Ethnocentrism Scale to these participants and sought to compare them to the pre-travel Ethnocentrism Scale scores of the participants in study one.

Descriptive analyses. For the 27 participants from study one who had self-selected as study abroad participants and who were measured prior to travel, the scores on the Ethnocentrism Scale remained the same ($M = 26.29$, $SD = 7.02$). The scores for the 26 new participants who expressed no intention to participate in study abroad were slightly higher, ($M = 31.91$, $SD = 8.64$).

Inferential analysis. An independent-samples *t*-test was computed to compare mean ethnocentrism scores for the two samples. The results of the independent-samples t-test confirmed the observation that the two administrations' mean scores were different. The group expressing no intention to travel scored higher on the Ethnocentrism Scale, $t(51) = -2.26$, $p = 0.03$. Therefore, they reported stronger ethnocentric beliefs than students who intended to participate in study abroad.

Study two discussion. Study two addressed the research question: Do students who intend to participate in study abroad hold less ethnocentric views compared to students who have no intentions to study abroad? An examination of the results of study two confirmed that the participants in study one were individuals who already held low levels of ethnocentric beliefs. When compared to a group of students from the same university, there was a statistically significant difference in ethnocentric beliefs as measured by the Ethnocentrism Scale. Students who expressed no intention to travel reported higher average ethnocentrism scores than those who were planning to participate in short-term study abroad. Therefore, the individuals who self-identify for study abroad experiences may not change their beliefs as a result of the experience simply because they already hold beliefs and attitudes that are tolerant of other cultures. The results of both studies led us to consider how faculty and higher education institutions should move forward in efforts to develop culturally competent graduates who will enter the workforce.

Discussion

We were guided in this research by the assumption that immersive experiences can be transformative. Specifically, we assumed that Bandura's social learning theory would apply to the development of cultural competence among students as a result of participating in a short-term study abroad program. That is, students participating in study abroad would have opportunities to observe and learn about another culture through immersion. While the results of the studies reported did not provide resounding support for the effectiveness of study abroad experiences in reducing ethnocentric beliefs, they revealed that students who choose to study abroad may represent a population of learners within higher education who already can "relax their culturally conditioned ways of seeing" and approaching foreign societies (Walonen, 2015,

p. 44). However, we cannot assume that such low levels of ethnocentrism exist among all students who participate in study abroad. In a case study of a pre-service teacher's intercultural development during a semester-long teacher education program abroad, Marx and Moss (2011) reported qualitative evidence of changes in ethnocentric beliefs. Marx and Moss noted that immersion in another culture challenges one's by creating cultural dissonance. That dissonance is reconciled through a process of raising one's cultural consciousness and increasing intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, participant characteristics may or may not influence the extent to which a study abroad experience changes one's beliefs about other cultures.

Apart from participant characteristics, it is important to note that study one measured ethnocentric beliefs before and after a short-term study abroad experience. Although study one showed that our participants reported low levels of ethnocentric beliefs prior to travel, we also must consider whether the intervention, the study abroad experience, was long enough in duration to produce a post-travel reduction in ethnocentrism beliefs. In this study, we did not compare study abroad experiences outside of short-term durations. However, DeLoach et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study of 80 study abroad programs from a single higher education institution. For all programs, participants were measured on global awareness before and after travel. Their results showed that increased duration of study abroad experiences that lasted an entire semester were associated with greater intercultural awareness when compared to students who participated in short-term study abroad programs. In contrast, those students who participated in short-term study abroad programs showed greater statistically significant gains in their awareness of global interdependence as compared to those who studied abroad for a semester. These results provide more evidence that changing attitudes and behaviors is complex. That is, there may be no single experience or intervention that may influence students' ethnocentric beliefs. Rather, we must understand the etiology of these beliefs before we can understand how they may be changed.

Conclusion

According to the United States Census (2022), there are approximately 333 million people in America. As our population increases, new Census data indicates that "4 in 10 Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than White" (Frey, 2020, Section 1). A diversified workforce is already necessary, and we must increase opportunities to develop cultural awareness among our youth to produce culturally competent employees. Study abroad programs are immersive and they directly facilitate engagement with businesses, educational facilities, and individuals from other countries. Study abroad allows students to have a direct experience with those outside of their day-to-day interactions. Research in study abroad programs can help facilitate a broader understanding of ethnocentrism and global awareness.

Based on our results, universities must be more aggressive in study abroad recruitment opportunities. Specifically, we recommend direct efforts to recruit those who have never planned to study abroad. This population, based on our results, may demonstrate greater changes in ethnocentric beliefs following immersive intercultural experiences. To understand how study abroad may influence individuals' beliefs about others and other cultures, future research should examine a variety of program lengths, varying academic and immersive experiences while traveling in the foreign country, and student traveler characteristics. It will be necessary to continue to complete formal assessment techniques related to study abroad and content, as most programs rely on anecdotal feedback from students. Therefore, continued research in this field is necessary (Kamdar & Lewis, 2015). In addition, it is important to

consider transformative experiences tied to study abroad programs and course content in order to facilitate the development of global awareness and intercultural sensitivity during a short-term program.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was completed at one single University in Texas. It would be helpful to get a broad group of participants from a variety of locations across the United States and perhaps beyond. Other experiences that offer students engagement, diverse and collaborative interactions, and transformational learning experiences would be beneficial to assess as well. Involvement with groups that facilitate conversations with global perspectives and cultural competence in mind would be a good starting point with freshman undergraduate students. As their college career progresses, offering more opportunities to take part in interactive experiences is necessary to foster a globally competent employee. We need to continue to work on these strategies within our Universities across the United States.

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