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Does Studying Abroad Make Individuals More Virtuous?

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**Introduction**

The importance for universities to foster attitudes in students that allow them to function well in society has been consistently mentioned and discussed in previous research (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). As the United States diversifies and globalizes, universities are emphasizing cultural understanding and acceptance in their students (Lee, Therriault & Linderholm, 2012). Therefore, most universities in the United States offer study abroad programs (Blake, Gasman, Esmieu, Samayoa, & Cener, 2020). Study abroad programs allow students to obtain academic credits while studying in a foreign country (Lee, Therriault & Linderholm, 2012). There have been initiatives to encourage participation in study abroad programs such as the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship (McClure et al., 2010) as well as the Paul Simon Study Abroad Act (NAFSA, 2020). The striking increase in students taking part in study abroad programs since the 1980s could be due to the increase in government initiatives. In 2013, there were over six times the number of students studying abroad than there were in the mid- 1980’s (amacad.org). The increase in government initiatives and study abroad participation may have been facilitated by the awareness of the researched benefits of studying abroad.

Previous research has found that there are many cognitive benefits of studying abroad (Lee, Therriault & Linderholm, 2012). A large-scale longitudinal research project (Carlson, Burn, Yachimowicz & Useem, 1990) led by researchers from multiple countries (Sweden, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France) found that study abroad students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills were positively impacted by the experience. This could be because the study abroad experience can consist of many challenging situations that require individuals think critically about the circumstance.

In addition, there are a number of non-cognitive benefits such as increases in self-esteem (Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009). While this aspect of self-appraisal might arise due to the challenges students must face and overcome in the course of dealing with life and studying in a foreign country, especially with a foreign language, these may reflect aspects of interacting with novel groups as well. This kind of interaction could also change the way people think, feel, and act towards other groups of people. Research has demonstrated that experiences such as intergroup contact have been shown to increase empathy as well as decrease prejudice towards individuals in the outgroup (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Increased exposure to diverse groups of people may increase egalitarian attitudes, empathy for others (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011), as well as prosocial behaviors (Nai, Narayanan, Hernandez, & Savani, 2018). Intergroup contact has been examined both for children growing up in diverse or homogenous neighborhoods (Shutts et al., 2011) as well as adults living diverse neighborhoods (Nai et al., 2018) but it is unclear the extent to which other real-world experiences can have a similar effect. For example, does studying abroad for part of a year, which consists of living and studying in a foreign country and interacting with peers from a different society and culture, influence such prosocial attitudes as well?

These changes could reflect changes in social attitudes and could reflect a kind of social learning from others in a foreign country. But it is possible that these changes could also reflect a change in the social values held by students following studying abroad.

Prosocial Virtues

Snow (2010) has argued that the kinds of prosocial values philosophers refer to as “virtues” (see also Peterson & Seligman, 2004) are a kind of social intelligence. The term “virtue” refers to a disposition towards excellence through character and behavior (Bright, Winn, & Kanov, 2014). People have been aware of the concept of virtue since Classical Greece, ca. 400 BC (Bright et al., 2014); according to Aristotle, humans are in search of living a good life (Hornbeck, 2017). Aristotle wrote that virtue leads individuals to experience *eudaimonia*, or “human excellence” (Bright et al., 2014). Virtues, such as gratitude and forgiveness, have been found to lead to prosocial behaviors (Garcia-Vazquez, Valdes- Cuervo, Martinez-Ferrer, & Parra-Perez, 2020). This interest in the psychology of virtues is a result of wanting to understand why some individuals choose to engage in prosocial behaviors while others choose not to engage in such behaviors (Fowers et al., 2020). Some research has suggested that certain virtues may develop through experience (see Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). Therefore, if experiences strengthen virtues, then it is crucial to understand the specific experiences that may cultivate virtues.

It is possible that studying abroad may strengthen civic virtues, which are moral or prosocial virtues that allow for people and societies to flourish. Specifically, civic virtues are related to how individuals interact with others in their societies. These virtues concern individuals recognizing the obligations that they have withing their communities, which include civic behaviors such as volunteering (Nusbaum, 2019). Therefore, civic virtues are important for creating flourishing and peaceful societies. Civic virtues consist of civility and compassion (Nusbaum, 2019). Increasing the virtue of civility will lead individuals to be polite to others, calmly talk about other’s perspectives, and having a sense of concern for society (Moore, 2012). For example, compassion, a kind of effective concern for the wellbeing of others (Snow, 1991), may underlie some civic virtues. According to Nusbaum (2019), civility and compassion can be strengthened through experience and practice. For example, Williams, Poljacik, Decety and Nusbaum (2018) found that participants who listened to loving-kindness language, that has previously been used in studies that utilized kindness-meditation training, were more compassionate to others without any explicit training. Strengthening the virtue of compassion would lead to perspective taking as well as empathetic concern for others which could be manifest in increased respect for others and a broader interest in improving justice in society (Nusbaum, 2019).

**Current study**

To what extent does increasing experience with other societies and different groups of people change attitudes towards others? Can this kind of experience lead to increases in civic virtues such as civility and compassion? Or are these psychological characteristics that develop over a much longer span of time than studying abroad? The study abroad experience may strengthen both civility and compassion because students are constantly interacting with people with different perspectives as well as meeting diverse individuals with different life situations and experiences. Strengthening civic virtues may also increase other psychological processes. For example, increasing civic virtues could increase perspective taking as well as epistemic humility which are related to wise reasoning (Nusbaum, 2019). Therefore, the psychological processes related to civic virtues that will also be examined in this study are social curiosity, epistemic humility, need for cognition, wisdom. Civic attitudes and behaviors will also be measured because they are related to the virtue of civility. Examining factors related to prosocial virtues in relation to studying abroad will shed light on whether prosocial attitudes can develop as a result of real- world experiences. Implications of this study would indicate that prosocial attitudes and other virtues can develop because of certain experiences.

My thesis seeks to answer the question “Does studying abroad increase civic virtues as well as other related psychological factors that are associated with prosocial attitudes, such as wisdom?”. This current study aims to answer the question by examining participants that previously studied abroad, participants that are interested in studying abroad, and participants that are not interested in studying abroad. Having these three categories of participants will allow for differences that may have resulted from studying abroad to be examined. Specifically, having participants who are interested in studying abroad and participants who are not interested will allow for the examination of differences in virtues and civic engagement based on study abroad interest. For example, do participants who are interested in studying abroad have higher levels of empathy than participants that are not interested in studying abroad?

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that students that studied abroad will have higher levels of virtues, which can be estimated by measures of interest in others (social curiosity) respect for others (civility), and compassion compared to participants that did not study abroad. The study abroad experience consists of many factors that may foster the development of virtues. While studying abroad, students are constantly interacting with natives of that country which could increase civic virtues (ex. civility and compassion). As mentioned previously, increasing compassion may also increase perspective taking and empathy which are related to wisdom. Therefore, it is predicted that studying abroad may increase civic virtues as well as other associated psychological factors (need for cognition, wise reasoning).

It was hypothesized that participants that study abroad will be more culturally competent than participants that did not study abroad. Many previous studies found that cultural competence was positively impacted as a result of studying abroad. Specifically, Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) conducted a study that implemented a pretest and posttest design to examine whether studying abroad programs provided opportunities for students to increase their cultural competence. To assess cultural competence, the researchers used the Intercultural Competence Inventory which consists of 50 items regarding how individuals respond to cultural differences. Results demonstrated that participants that studied abroad had significantly higher gains in cultural competence than the control group. Their results also showed that the increases in cultural competence were also maintained for five months for some of the participants.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample for this study consisted of 237 students who attend the University of Chicago. However, 40 of those participants did not complete a significant amount of the survey and therefore were excluded from further analysis. The 22 international students were also excluded from analysis because their experiences are substantially different from students that studied abroad because international students typically study in a different country for longer than a year while study abroad students usually learn abroad for a single term. International students are also dissimilar from students that have not studied abroad because international students moved to a different country for their schooling. The final sample consisted of 175 participants with 127 females, 35 males and 13 who identified as "other." Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old. Participants identified as African American (*n* = 6), Asian (*n* = 42), Caucasian (*n* = 77), Hispanic/ Latinx (*n* = 12), Native American or Pacific Islander (*n* = 1), two or more races (*n* = 30). Six participants preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. There were three different groups of participants: Those who previously studied abroad (N= 87), those who expressed interest in studying abroad (N= 60), and those with no interest in studying abroad (N= 28).

**Measures**

The measures for this study included scales assessing compassion, civility, wisdom, civic engagement, epistemic humility, need for cognition, social curiosity, and affective state. Questions were also used to assess hardships experienced by participants, demographics, study abroad engagement, cultural competency, and generosity.

***Compassion****. Empathy Quotient-8 Scale* (Loewen, Lyle & Nachshen, 2009) was used to measure empathy. The scale consists of 8 items on a 5- point scale (1 “Never” to 5 “Always”). An example item is “I am good at predicting how someone will feel.”.

***Civility***. *Workplace Relational Civility Scale* (Di Fabio, & Gori, 2016) was modified for our student population and used to assess relational civility with classmates and friends. The scale consists of 26 items on a 5-point scale (1 “not at all” to 5 “a great deal”). The first portion consists of items pertaining to how the participant interacted with classmates/ friends (e.g., “I was able to express my values and my beliefs calmly to others”). The second portion includes statements about how classmates/ friends interacted with the participant (e.g., Others were able to express their values and their beliefs calmly to me).

*The Civic Engagement Scale* (Doolittle & Faul, 2013) measured individual's attitudes and behaviors that have been affected by a service-learning experience. The scale consisted of two portions: civic attitudes and civic behaviors. The civic attitudes portion of the scale consists of eight items that asks participants the degree to which they agree with the statements on a 7-point Likert- type scale (1 “Disagree” to 7 “Agree”). An example item is “I feel responsible for my community”. The civic engagement behavior portion of the scale consisted of six items in which participants indicated the degree of involvement in each activity on a 7-point Likert- type scale (1 “Never” to 7 “Always”). An example item is “I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community”.

***Social Curiosity Scale*** (SCS) (Renner, 2006) was used to measure interest in individuals’ actions, thoughts, and beliefs. The scale consists of 14 items on a 4-point scale (1 “Strongly disagree” to 4 “Strongly agree”). An example item is “When I meet a new person, I am interested in learning more about him/her.”.

***Lottery question****.* Results obtained by Loewen, Lyle, and Nachshen (2009) suggested that individuals who are more empathetic are more generous than less empathetic individuals. Therefore, in order to measure generosity, the “Dictator Game”, which is an experimental paradigm where a participant is given the decision on whether they are willing to give a percentage or all of a certain resource to an another individual (Leder, Schütz, 2018), was modified and participants were told that they were entered to win $100 in a lottery and is asked how much they would like to donate to Doctors Without Borders should they win. The participants were presented with a scale in which they can move the arrow to indicate how much money they were interested in donating. The scale went from $0 to $100. The $100 raffle prize was included so that there is monetary incentive and deciding to donate will have an impact on how much the participant will get if they win the lottery.

***Epistemic Humility Questionnaire*** was used to assess awareness of one’s own knowledge as well as the limitations of one's knowledge. Participants were asked to rate how much they agree with 16 statements on a 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 8 (“Strongly Agree”) scale. Example statements are “I am honest with myself when I assess my own faults and limitations.” and “I readily admit when I don't know how to do something.”.

***Situated Wise Reasoning Scale*** (SWIS) (Brienza, Kung, Santos, Bobocel & Grossmann, 2018) was used to measure how people responded to a conflict they thought of from their personal life and if they employed wisdom to resolve conflict. The SWIS scale assesses five different domains of wisdom: consideration of other’s perspectives, consideration of change and multiple ways a situation may unfold, recognition of limits of knowledge, search for compromise or conflict resolution, and consideration of an outsider’s perspective. Participants were first asked to think about a conflict that they had with a close friend. Then participants were asked to indicate whether they engaged in 21 different thoughts and behaviors, on a 5-point scale (1 “Not at all” to 5 “Very much”), while the situation was unfolding. An example statement is “Made an effort to take the other person’s perspective”.

***Need for cognition scale*** (NFC) (Cacioppo, Petty & Kao, 1984) is used to assess whether participants enjoy engaging in thinking. The scale consists of 6 items on a 5-point scale (1 “Extremely Uncharacteristic” to 4 “Extremely Characteristic”). An example item is “I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems”.

***Positive and Negative Affect Schedule*** (PANAS) (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess participants’ mood before they complete the hardship scale. Participants were presented with 10 emotions and were asked to indicate to what extent they feel each emotion/feeling on a 5-point Likert- type scale (1 “Very slightly or not at all” to 5 “Extremely”). The 10 emotions/feelings were active, enthusiastic, afraid, excited, nervous, upset, irritable, scared, attentive, and strong.

***Hardship questions****.* Questions regarding challenges that participants may have encountered, such as prejudice, were also asked.

***Cultural Competency*.** The study abroad office provided questions that were used to measure cultural competency. Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with eight statements regarding views about other cultures on a scale from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). Example statements include “I am informed of current issues and events that impact international relations.” and “I take into account different perspectives before drawing conclusions about the world around me.”

***Demographics****.* The demographics consisted of questions asking about age, identified gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic-status, financial obligations (ex. How often do you worry about meeting your day-to-day financial obligations?), years lived in the United States, and languages spoken fluently.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited from various sources: Facebook advertisement, email, or through the University of Chicago Psychology Department SONA system which is an online system for research management and participation. Participants who studied abroad were emailed about participating in the study. If they wanted to participate, then they were emailed the Qualtrics link for the survey. Other participants signed up to participate through the university’s SONA system. Once participants signed up for the study, they gained access to the survey which was created on Qualtrics. Participants read the consent form and indicated willingness to participate before they were able to proceed to the survey. Participants responded to the scales in the order that follows; Relational Civility Scale, Civic engagement Scale, SWIS, NFC, Epistemic Humility Scale, SCS, and PANAS. Participants indicated if they wanted to enter a lottery to receive $100 by providing their email address. They indicated whether they wanted to donate a portion of the $100 if they end up winning the lottery. Participants then completed the hardship scale.

Finally, participants completed the demographic questionnaire which asked about previous travel experiences, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identified gender, grade level and whether they participated in a study abroad program during high school. Participants indicated their study abroad experience during their undergraduate years to date, and whether they studied abroad during their undergraduate career, whether they have signed up to study abroad during the 2020-21 academic year, whether they were interested in studying abroad, or whether they have no interest in studying abroad. Participants also indicated whether they were current international students. If participants indicated they have studied abroad, then they were asked questions about their study abroad experience, such as the length of their study abroad program, their host country, and where they lived while studying abroad (i.e., dorm or host family). The study abroad participants were presented with a questionnaire that asked about the skills and behaviors acquired while abroad. All participants were presented with questions regarding cultural competency. Lastly, all participants had the option to receive either Sona credit or a $10 Amazon gift card as compensation.

Results

The aim of this study was to assess whether civic virtues and other related psychological processes (ex. wisdom, social curiosity, and need for cognition) were increased by the study abroad experience. As mentioned previously, it was hypothesized that the study abroad participants would have higher levels on civic virtue measures as well as the related psychological processes than the participants that did not study abroad. Also, it was predicted that participants that did not study abroad, which included interested and not interested participants, would have similar scores on the measures due to not having studied abroad.

Civic virtues are related to positive social consideration for other people such as respect and compassion, as well as a concern for justice. If these aspects of civic virtues are affected by studying abroad, we would expect increased civility, curiosity about others, civic engagement, and empathy for others. A one-way ANOVA was run to compare empathy scores for the study abroad participants, participants who were interested in studying abroad, and participants who were not interested in studying abroad. Studying abroad increases empathy (*F*(2,172) = 4.124, *p* = .01). A Tukey post hoc test revealed a significant difference (p = .005) between participants who studied abroad (*M*= 30.64, *SD*= 3.48) and participants who were interested in studying abroad (*M*= 28.66, *SD*= 4.88). This suggests it is the experience of studying abroad that affects empathy although it is possible that students with greater empathy are more likely to study abroad. Further, results showed that there was no significant association between level of empathy and decision to donate lottery winning, *X*2 (2, *N* = 175) = 2.9, *p* = .233. This suggests that while studying abroad affects empathy, it does not impact generosity.

The three groups did not differ in relational civility scores, *F*(2,172) = 1.019, *p* = .363. Similarly, social curiosity scores were not significantly different among the groups, *F*(2,172) = .741, *p* = .478. There were also no main effects between any of the groups and social curiosity scores. This did not support the hypothesis that studying abroad would increase social curiosity. Further, there are no differences in student civic engagement with studying abroad. Civic behaviors were not significantly different among the groups, *F*(2,172) = 2.700, *p* = .07 and there was no difference in civic attitudes *F*(2,172) = 1.457, *p* = 2.36. Thus, across measures of civility, social curiosity and civic engagement, there were no differences among students who studied abroad, who had an interest in studying abroad but had not yet done so, and those students with no interest in studying abroad.

Intellectual virtues, which allow for the pursuit of wisdom, include intellectual humility, open mindedness, and the desire and love to learn. Therefore, if intellectual virtues are impacted by studying abroad, then need for cognition, wisdom, epistemic humility are predicted to be positively impacted. Results suggest that the hypothesis that intellectual virtues and other related variables increased was partially supported. There was evidence that studying abroad increases recognition of limits of knowledge as measured by the Situated Wise Reasoning Scale (SWIS) (*F*(2, 172) = 7.36, *p* <.001). A Tukey post hoc test revealed a significant difference (*p* =.002) between the participants that studied abroad (*M*= 13.49, *SD*= 3.40) and participants that were not interested in studying abroad (*M*= 11, *SD*= 3.11). There was also a significant difference (*p* = .001) between participants who are interested in studying abroad (*M*= 13.75, *SD*= 3.25) and participants that are not interested in studying abroad (*M*= 11, *SD*= 3.11). There is also evidence that epistemic humility was increased by studying abroad *F*(2,172) = 3.416, *p* = .03. A Tukey post hoc test revealed a significant difference (*p* =.02) between the participants that studied abroad (*M*= 93.93, *SD*= 12.68) and participants that were not interested in studying abroad (*M*= 87, *SD*= 16.38). These results suggest that there are differences in students that want to study abroad compared to students who do not want to study abroad on the wisdom domain of recognition of limits of knowledge. Lastly, results from this study suggest that studying abroad does not increase need for cognition (*F*(2,172) = .315, *p* = .731).

Individuals who are culturally competent can “…interact effectively with people of diverse origins, perspectives, and abilities.” (Levesque-Bristol & Cornelius-White, 2012). Results suggest that the hypothesis that cultural competency increased was supported. There was evidence that studying abroad increases cultural competency (*F*(2,172) = 6.517, *p* = .002). A Tukey post hoc test revealed a significant difference (*p* <.001) between the participants that studied abroad (*M*= 36.36, *SD*= 4.80) and participants that were not interested in studying abroad (*M*= 32.86, *SD*= 4.81). There was also a significant difference (*p* = .036) between participants who are interested in studying abroad (*M*= 35.05, *SD*= 3.96) and participants that are not interested in studying abroad (*M*= 32.86, *SD*= 4.81). This supports previous findings that students that study abroad may become more culturally competent after the experience.

Discussion

Previous research has been concerned with increasing virtues in individuals because virtues allow for both individuals and communities to flourish. Civic virtues are necessary for societies because these virtues allow individuals to live harmoniously (Nusbaum, 2019). Therefore, given the current climate of the American society where there has been a surge of hate crimes targeted towards Asians after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tessler, Choi, & Kao, 2020), there has been an outstanding need to understand what experiences can strengthen and unify communities. Given the immersive and interactive nature of the study abroad experience, it is probable that studying abroad can strengthen virtues. Therefore, this study explored the question of whether studying abroad increases civic virtues and other potentially related psychological factors (e.g., wisdom, social curiosity, need for cognition, etc.). Results of this study provide evidence that the study abroad experience increases civic virtues as well as intellectual virtues and related psychological processes.

Comparing a group of participants who studied abroad and two groups who did not study abroad (interested and not interested participants) shed light on the effect of studying abroad. These results contribute to the already existing literature on study abroad by demonstrating that there are more potential benefits of studying abroad than has been previously examined in other studies. Results of this study point to the direction that studying abroad may foster the development of civic and intellectual virtues. Specifically, empathy and the intellectual humility dimension of wisdom were higher in participants that studied abroad. Another contribution of this study is that it allows for further understanding of the importance of the role that experiences play in strengthening virtues. Specifically, immersive experiences that allow for intergroup contact, perspective taking, and exposure to cultural differences can strengthen virtues, both civic (e.g., empathy) and intellectual (e.g., wisdom).

An implication of this study is that more initiatives on character education do not need to be implemented if their target group is early adults because most universities have study abroad programs. However, in the United States, only about 11% of undergraduate students participate in a study abroad program before they graduate (opendoorsdata.org). Previous literature suggests that a disproportionate number of students that study abroad tend to be white. Therefore, it is important for future research to examine why some students decide to study abroad while others do not, as well as why minority students are less likely to study abroad so that universities can increase participation in their study abroad programs. Future studies should also implement a pretest-posttest research design.

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