

American Study Abroad: Forming a National Identity

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Abstract

White U. S. students struggle to share their American culture and identity when they participate in study abroad programs. As White Americans, these students have never had to deconstruct their race or culture. Cultural hegemony allows them to experience their privileged identities without investing time to reflect on or develop their national identity. The events of 9/11 caused a paradigm shift; American students were expected to be able to speak about their nation's culture, politics, and identity. Study abroad programs should develop pre-trip programming to help students investigate their culture and identity so the students will be prepared for interactions abroad.

American Study Abroad: Forming a National Identity

White U. S. students struggle to share their culture and national identities with host country nationals during study abroad (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). The students' majority status and their appreciation for Americanized ethnic foods has made it difficult, if not impossible to define their American culture (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). The inability to formulate and speak about their primary culture forces students to develop ideas about what their home culture is like while living in their host culture (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). Americans have been able to create imagined communities that ignore the inequality and exploitation that helped the privileged race develop their power (Anderson, 2006). What has become American culture to Whites has developed through an acculturation process in which the dominant race adopts pieces of the subordinate races and ethnicities (Gallagher, 2003). The current process of study abroad programming perpetuates the cultural hegemony which Gramsci (1971) labeled the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class. To enable students to develop further in their intercultural competency and maturity and to challenge the cultural hegemony, students must educate themselves of both U.S. and world issues prior to engaging in study abroad (Bennett, 2012; Bollag, 2004; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

Nationalism: The Acculturation Process to Create an American Identity

Nationalism invents nations where they do not exist (Anderson, 2006). Community members invent images of communion and cultural harmony though they may know nothing of their fellow community members or their individualities and identities (Anderson, 2006). The American identity is a social construction and White Americans do not often define what it means to be American or what American culture encompasses (Gallagher, 2003; Savicki & Colley, 2011). College students who identify as White are most often disassociated with race and ethnicity and ignore or neglect conceptualizing an American culture. However, White American college students will engage in the concept of "being ethnic for a day" (p. 29) by celebrating St. Patrick's Day or participating in cultural events that divert from the dominant narrative of the typical White American (Gallagher, 2003). Students defining their American identities while abroad are creating the imagined community, imagined identity Anderson (2006) discussed.

Impacts of 9/11

The events of 9/11 changed the way American students studying abroad felt about their home country (Dolby, 2004). With American culture and America's diplomatic response heavily in the news, students were hounded for answers from the host country nationals (Dolby, 2004; Goldstein & Kim, 2005). On a study abroad exchange trip with Americans and Australians, the American students voiced distaste for the American stereotypes the Australians had about them due to the themes and figures Australians had seen in the media (Goldstein & Kim, 2005). The American students were angry that the Australians thought of Jerry Springer as encapsulating the typical American and that McDonalds was referred to as the American embassy. Though the American students were frustrated by the generalizations, their frustration expanded due to their own ignorance on state issues (Dolby, 2004); a majority of students did not know what was happening in American politics stateside or internationally. If students want to get out of this cloud of ignorance, they must educate themselves prior to participating in education abroad activities.

Towns (2011) argues that 9/11 changed the way millennials view the world. Millennials are people born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s (Main, 2013). Towns (2011) believes millennials are more accepting of differing cultural identities and do not tolerate racial profiling, especially unnecessary airport checks for people who appear to be of Middle Eastern descent. Students in Dolby's (2007) study experienced hostility towards Americans and the American government while they were studying abroad. The students who experienced aggression due to their national identities learned to adapt their national identities while remaining open to opinion and perspectives that varied from their own (Dolby, 2007). The criticism they received from peers in their host country led to the false sense of community and nationalism which led students to imagine America as they wanted it to be (Dolby, 2004).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Gramsci (1971) found that capitalism perpetuated a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the common sense values of all. White Americans live the hegemony without questioning the privilege they experience (Johnson, 2006). The privilege and notion of superiority that White Americans experience is socially constructed (Allen, 1994). The Irish were once considered not White though now Americans celebrate

St. Patrick's Day as a way to reconnect with cultural roots and heritage with which they or their friends identify (Gallagher, 2003). White students who attend predominately White institutions are never in a space which requires them to question their culture or White identities. Studying abroad can often bring about the first experience with marginalization for White American students (Savicki & Cooley, 2011).

Utilization of Theory & Application

Critical Whiteness Pedagogy

Critical Whiteness Pedagogy combats the fickle attitudes toward one's racial and ethnic identities by encouraging intergroup dialogue (Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). Studies show that students increase knowledge and self-awareness of social justice issues including racial and cultural differences when they engage in intergroup dialogues (Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). Study abroad programs in higher education can therefore increase awareness and preparedness in their students by offering programs that encourage intergroup dialogue using Critical Whiteness Pedagogy.

Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity gives context to intercultural exchange and helps explain the reduction of students' ethnocentric behaviors. Sumner (1906) claimed ethnocentrism leads people to "exaggerate and intensify everything in their own folkways which is peculiar and which differentiates them from others (p. 13). Pelosi (2009) found that students defined their American selves while studying abroad. Of the four students Pelosi studied, one student rejected his American self completely. Jacob chose to study abroad in Moscow to reconnect with his birth country and while abroad, Jacob cast off his American upbringing to reconnect to his cultural heritage (Pelosi, 2009). Study abroad experiences are different for American students of color (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). Students of color whose families have lived in America for several generations may have given up their heritage and ethnic traditions to establish an American national identity (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). Giving up heritage and tradition was an acculturation process and took away some of the cultural forms of food, language, sexual behavior, and even the ways one sits or stands by developing ethnocentric American behavior (McEwen, Roper, Bryan & Langua, 1990). Study abroad programs encourage students to interact cross-culturally and develop ethnorelative beliefs. The ethnorelative perspective "represents the degree to

which a person can increasingly maintain an autonomous cultural reference while simultaneously embracing or understanding a multicultural frame of reference (Rexeisen & Al-Khatib, 2009, p. 197). Ethnorelativism would allow students to both develop an American identity and to partake in the host culture and critical discussions regarding American politics and American ideals with host country nationals.

Dvorak, Christiansen, Fischer, and Underhill (2011) argue that the primary purpose of international programs is “to encourage students to build understanding and respect the cultures of the world’s many people” (p. 145). According to their research, having a strong American identity is then not essential to study abroad. However, experiences abroad can help students define their American identities based on the cross-cultural engagement (Pelosi, 2009). Including White identity and White culture into one’s American identity is often lacking in study abroad programs. When students engage in study abroad programs in Western Europe, for example, they may cast off ethnocentric beliefs about America and the rest of the world, but they do not engage in what it means to be a White American or how American culture is vast and difficult to measure.

Conclusion

What is known is that White U.S. students conceptualize their American identities based upon external factors such as 9/11 and reactions from host country nationals. What is still unknown is how deeply White students interpret their American identities before they engage in study abroad. Thoughtful programming for study abroad programs is needed to increase awareness and preparedness in White U. S. students before they leave to study abroad.

There are many critical questions regarding developing an American cultural identity that have yet to be answered. Would students benefit from developing stronger American identities prior to leaving the United States or would this make it more difficult to develop intercultural competency and maturity? Would having a firmer concept of the American identity enhance the overall experience of studying abroad? These questions require further research and investigation.

Further investigation and research should be done to discover how students are defining their American identities. This research should include an analysis of how 9/11 and the recent U.S. wars have influenced students desire to study abroad and how it has

shaped their conceptualization of the American identity. Qualitative research on students from various cultural American backgrounds would help further the investigation of what constitutes an American cultural identity.

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