OVERCOMING CULTURAL BARRIERS IN SPORT MANAGEMENT STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS: THE INFLUENCE OF EXTENDED INTERGROUP CONTACT

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Study abroad programs offer a host of benefits to the students involved (Jones & Cunningham, 2008). Given that sport is a global enterprise (Howard & Crompton, 2004; Hums & MacLean, 2004), organizations have increasingly sought to develop leaders who can manage the complexities associated with sport organizations in a global environment (Dickmann & Harris, 2005). Study abroad helps to achieve this end. Consider, for instance, that students who participate in study abroad programs have been shown to demonstrate cross-cultural competencies (Kitzhaber, 2004; McCabe, 1994), a political awareness for international issues (Carlson & Widaman, 1988), the ability to relate with persons different from the self on an interpersonal level (Drews, Meyer, & Peregrine, 1996), a concern for the peace and well-being of persons in other nations (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990), and a reduction in prejudice (Lindley, 2005). Further, while the classroom environment can aid in student understanding of some international issues, the aforementioned benefits are thought to only be truly realized through the study abroad experience (Henthorne, Miller, & Hudson, 2001; Peppas, 2005). It is hardly surprising, then, that employers highly value such experiences (Vaccaro, 2002).

Despite these many benefits, study abroad programs are also wrought with factors that could potentially deter one from participating or detract from the actual experience. For instance, Jones and Cunningham (2008), in their examination of sport management students’ interest in study abroad, found that several factors served to dissuade them from participating in such programs, including language barriers, cultural differences, separation from friends and family, and financial considerations. Goldstein and Kim (2006) observed a similar pattern, as students in their investigation who chose not to study
abroad, relative to those who had, were more ethnocentric, expressed greater prejudice, and had less interest in foreign languages. The aforementioned issues not only serve as a deterrent to studying abroad, but they can also negatively influence people's study abroad experiences. Ryan and Twibell (2000) noted that "the process and stress of cultural adaptation place students who study abroad at risk for health alterations, which may in turn impede the ability of students to participate fully in the cultural integration and learning experiences" (p. 409; see also Twibell, Ryan, & Limbird, 1995).

Thus, although study abroad experiences can be beneficial for the student, there are many factors that could potentially limit the learning experience and result in poor health. There is a need, therefore, for strategies to assuage these potential negative effects during a students' time abroad. In this study, we drew from the intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) to examine one such approach. Specifically, we examined the degree to which interpersonal contact among dissimilar others influenced the development of intergroup friendships, decreased cross-cultural anxiety, and improved the evaluations of out-group members among students studying abroad. These effects were examined over time in a longitudinal examination. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the theory guiding the project and an overview of the study.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to the social categorization perspective (Riordan, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), people classify themselves and others into social groups. The classification can be based on a myriad of characteristics, including demographics, language, and culture. Thus, people define themselves and others in terms of a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In general, people will hold more positive attitudes toward in-group members (i.e., people similar to the self) than they do toward their out-group counterparts (i.e., people different from the self). There likely exists, then, an intergroup bias, such that there are differences in the affective reactions and helping behavior given to in-group and out-group members. Within the group setting, this creates “us” and “them” dynamics. These social categorizations and related biases are used in subsequent interactions (Tsui & Gutek, 1999) such that attitudes formed toward out-group members in one situation are applied toward persons of the same social category in similar situations in the future.

These dynamics are important in all social settings, including study abroad programs (Ellers & Abrams, 2003). In this case, differences in language, customs, and preferences are accentuated, thereby increasing the potential anxiety that accompanies being an out-group member. Indeed, such stressors have been identified as a key reason why more people do not participate in such activities (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Jones
& Cunningham, 2008). Consequently, it is critical for study abroad hosts to take steps to quell the fears and anxieties students might possess during their study abroad experience.

The social psychology literature speaks specifically to mechanisms that can be used to alter the aforementioned categorization boundaries that contribute to stress and anxiety. Specifically, intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) suggests that extended interactions among persons who are otherwise dissimilar from one another should serve to break down the barriers. The positive effects of contact are thought to be accentuated when there is equal status between the groups, common goals that the group members seek to achieve, cooperation among group members, and support from authorities or customs. In extending this perspective, Pettigrew (1998) argued that friendships, or the potential thereof (Cunningham, 2008), were critical to breaking down the categorization boundaries.

Consider for instance, that people who develop friendships with out-group members are also likely to learn information about, alter their behaviors directed toward, develop affective ties with, and ultimately re-evaluate their assessments of those persons—all of which are critical in reducing intergroup bias (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). As Ellers and Abrams (2003) note, people with out-group friends are likely to "learn more about customs and way of life of the outgroup, re-evaluate their ingroup as a result of this long-term contact, and change their behavior vis-à-vis other outgroup members given their attitude change" (p. 59).

Research has demonstrated the positive effects of intergroup contact among in-group and out-group members. For instance, Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that persons who had friends who disclosed their homosexuality to them had more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities than did their counterparts. In his study of persons from several European nations, Pettigrew (1997) found that the presence of demographically different friends was strongly associated with lower levels of prejudice. Finally, and perhaps most pertinent to the current study, Eller and Abrams (2003) conducted a study of Americans studying Spanish in Mexican language institutes. They observed that friendships with dissimilar others was meaningfully related to a variety of outcomes, including decreased anxiety directed toward the out-group, knowledge of the out-group, and social distance. These findings suggest that forming friends with out-group members might help to reduce the negative effects of diversity in a group setting (see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).

Current study

In drawing from intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), the purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which interpersonal contact among persons in a study abroad program served to influence their intergroup friendships, cross-cultural anxiety, and evaluations of out-
group members. The research setting was a large, public university located in the Southwest United States. The sport management program at the university hosted 20 persons from six nations for a five-week program aimed at examining the American sport brand.

Extensive interaction among students was ensured in a number of ways. The students spent the better part of 12 hours a day with one another, learning about the American sport brand in the classroom, taking field trips across the country to different sport events and venues, and spending their "free time" learning about American culture. Across the duration of the program, the students spent more time in interpersonal interactions than they did listening to classroom lectures. It is worth noting, however, that even the classroom content was designed to encourage participation among the participants. All participants also stayed in the same dorm (when on the host campus) or hotel (when traveling) throughout the program. Thus, they were able to engage in extra interactions with one another as well.

The program was designed to emphasize the conditions of contact. Specifically, equal status of the students, irrespective of their nationality, was reinforced. As one example of this, the students were all afforded the same benefits of the program including cultural experiences, per diem, and sport and recreational events. Program participants also had common goals of the group, through their shared objectives of learning about the American sport brand. Cooperation among group members was reinforced through group projects and participation within one another on sport teams (e.g., recreational soccer and basketball games that were played over the course of the program). Finally, there was considerable institutional support for cooperation among the study abroad administrators, as these persons made concerted efforts to ensure that the aforementioned conditions were reinforced both among themselves and from the support staff.

Based on intergroup contact theory, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What influence did the study abroad have on the students' intergroup friendships?

RQ2: What influence did the study abroad have on the students' cross-cultural anxiety?

RQ3: What influence did the study abroad have on evaluations of out-group members?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were 20 undergraduate students who took part in a study abroad program (five students from the United States, and three students each from Indonesia, Nigeria, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela). The sample consisted of 8 men and 12 women.
Measures

Participants received a questionnaire that asked them to respond to items designed to measure their intergroup friendships, cross-cultural anxiety, and out-group evaluations.

The presence of intergroup friendships was evaluated with three items adapted from Cunningham (2008). The original items were designed for the physical activity class setting, while these items were adapted to the current context (e.g., “I have been able to form friendships with people from other countries”). Responses were made using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability of the measure was acceptable at both times of measurement: Time 1 $\alpha = .73$, Time 2 $\alpha = .65$.

Cross-cultural anxiety was measured with eight items from Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran (2000). Participants responded how they felt when interacting with out-group members based on a variety of dimensions (e.g., “apprehensive”, “friendly”, “worried”). Responses were made using a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), and the scale was found to be reliable (Time 1 $\alpha = .75$, Time 1 $\alpha = .85$).

Finally, evaluations of out-group members were made using six 7-point semantic different scales from Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) (e.g., “cold-warm”, “negative-positive”, “hostile-friendly”). Reliability estimates were high at both times of measurement: Time 1 $\alpha = .85$, Time 1 $\alpha = .85$.

Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed at the end of the first week of the study abroad and again at the end of the final week, five weeks later. All students consented to participate and their doing so was completely voluntary. In addition, students were asked to keep a personal journal of their experiences during the study abroad. The frequency of the journal entries varied by participant, as some wrote daily while others wrote weekly. As explained in further detail in the following section, these journals were analyzed to further understand the influence that the study abroad experience had on the students inter-personal interactions.

Data analysis

Data analysis took part in two phases. For the quantitative data, means and standard deviations were computed for all variables. A repeated measures analysis of variance was then computed to examine the degree to which the mean scores for intergroup friendships, cross-cultural anxiety, and evaluations of out-group members changed over time. Because of the small sample size ($N = 20$), we increased the alpha level to .10.

With respect to the qualitative data from the personal journals, all journal entries were transcribed. Identifying information on the journal allowed us to know who wrote which entry. In following a constructivist (interpretivist) paradigm (see Ponterotto, 2005), the raw data were analyzed and broken down
into codes based on the major themes of the theoretical framework: intergroup friendships, cross-cultural anxiety, and evaluations of out-group members. Such an approach is consistent with what Schwandt (2007) terms, “an a priori, content-specific scheme” where codes are “developed from careful study of the problem or topic under investigation and the theoretical interests that drive the inquiry” (p. 32). Following the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), an independent researcher reviewed a portion of the codes, themes, and interpretations in order to provide an audit of the work.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Means and standard deviations for both times of measurement are presented in Table 1. From a descriptive standpoint, the presence of intergroup friendships were high at both times of measurement, and results from a one-sample t-test indicated that the mean scores at both times of measurement were greater than the midpoint of the scale (4): Time 1 t (19) = 3.05, p < .01; Time 2 t (19) = 11.42, p < .001. On the other hand, mean scores for cross-cultural anxiety were both lower than the midpoint of the scale (4): Time 1 t (19) = -6.44, p < .001; Time 2 t (19) = -6.74, p < .001. Finally, evaluations of out-group members at Time 1 and Time 2 were both higher than the midpoint of the scale: Time 1 t (19) = 9.29, p < .001; Time 2 t (19) = 13.28, p < .001.

Results from the repeated measures analysis of variance demonstrated significant effects within-subjects effects, Wilks’ Λ = .33, F (3, 13) = 8.68, p < .01. Univariate analyses demonstrated evidence of significant effects for intergroup friendships, F (1, 15) = 20.71, p < .001, partial η² = .58, and for evaluations of out-group members, F (1, 15) = 3.65, p < .10, partial η² = .20. In both cases, mean scores significantly increased from the beginning of the study abroad program to the end, and the variance explained (20-58%) was large. On the other hand, cross-cultural anxiety did not change significantly, F (1, 15) = 2.10, p = .17, partial η² = .12.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations at the Beginning and End of the Study Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Beginning (Time 1)</th>
<th></th>
<th>End (Time 2)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup friendships</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural anxiety</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations of out-group members</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative results

Intergroup friendships. The journal entries made at the beginning of the study abroad focused on the students’ “informal relationships,” relationships that centered more on learning from one another rather than about one another. To this end, students referred to intergroup friendships in very general terms, such as “friendly” and “social” interactions. However, the effort and interest in meeting new people was evident as participants “tried to interact and talk with almost everyone”. Few students mentioned other individuals, and not one participant referred to another by name. In describing these early interactions, one participant specifically wrote that she had made “acquaintances” and “relationships not yet”, meaning that close ties had not yet been formed. This was substantiated by another participant who “just said hello to everyone”, but “expected more interaction” with advancement of the program.

While student responses became more detailed and friendships became a more prevalent topic as the program progressed, participants were still hesitant to write about one another by name. Instead, individuals were referred to by their nationality. One participant wrote that she “loves her friendships with the Americans, Russians, and Turks”, while another student attempted to talk with at least one person from every country but continued to converse “more with the Russians”. Similarly, another participant wrote she “had a lot of interaction with people of all countries, but less with the Indonesians”. Such entries would seem to indicate that participants still viewed one another as ingroup/out-group members rather than as a collective study abroad group.

These dynamics changed, however, by the end of the study abroad experience, as final participant responses and journal entries were noticeably different. One’s country of origin no longer seemed to matter, as several students claimed to have “formed friendships with every participant”. Relationships were no longer simple interactions, but had grown into “long lasting relationships”. Participants had made friendships that will last “a long, long time” and vowed to “keep in touch after we leave each other”. One participant was especially appreciative of the new relationships, taking with her “the friendship and love of people around the world, and money can’t buy that”.

Cross-cultural anxiety. Cross-cultural anxiety seemed to be at a minimum for participants as they began the study abroad program—data that are also supported in the quantitative analysis. Data collected at the beginning of the program indicated nominal concern for differences among the participants (e.g. “for me it doesn’t matter where the person is from”). Students were eager to meet one another and share their cultural backgrounds and experiences, and early interactions were “positive”. One student did confess to being a little anxious, but immediately quelled those fears by writing that she was “comfortable with all the people”. Another noted the expectation that most people would
be “easy to get along with, but not everybody is going to be your friend”.

Several other participants recognized the potential for troubles caused by differences in “religion, status, and language”, but commended the program and other participants for not letting such dissimilarities become an issue. Instead, participants chose to embrace their differences and use them as a teaching/learning experience. “I think every member of the program has something to deliver in terms of their culture. Every participant seems to have opened up and is willing to interact with everyone else”. Furthermore, participants were “interested in making friends and forming relationships and/or acquaintances”.

Interestingly, some responses did indicate possible apprehension on the part of the American participants. Being that the study abroad program focused on the American Sports Brand and was taking place in America, several of the American participants felt obliged to be “patient and humble” and to “explain concepts which the international students don’t understand”. However, another admitted to enjoying “how international students are eager to learn”. At the end of the program, such responsibilities were seen more as learning opportunities than obligations, recognizing that it “was a positive for me to get used to situations like these”. Another American participant admitted that throughout the program he had to “learn to deal with people with all types of personalities” and in doing so, “changed my initial perceptions of them”.

Evaluations of out-group members. Participant responses also indicated the evaluations of out-group members were positively influenced by the study abroad program. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of the program participants referred to one another by nationality; that is, individuals from the same country were viewed as a collective group (i.e. Americans, Indonesians, Nigerians, Russians, Turks, and Venezuelans), possibly fostering ingroup/out-group sentiments. Despite potential categorization biases, none of the participants openly expressed coming into the program harboring positive or negative attitudes toward certain nationalities. Instead, participants recognized that they were from “different cultures” yet they “shared so many things”. However, in observing the participants, it was evident in the beginning that they preferred to be with individuals from their own country.

The in-group/out-group distinctions appeared to dissipate over the course of the program, as participants began to identify with the collective study abroad program as opposed to their individual countries. The everyday interactions with one another seem to have been an area where most participants grew to appreciate each other’s cultural differences. Several participants echoed the response of one individual who enjoyed the chance to “to listen to other people and to share their beliefs, cultures...I have really learnt a lot”.

The lack of out-group bias was evident at the conclusion of the program as witnessed in one participant’s journal: “I
really think we are not that different”. This sentiment was reiterated by another participant who claimed that in the end “we all realized we are the same...humans with dreams and goals to achieve” and that it was “difficult to differentiate among us, except through complexion”. The impact of the program on in-group/out-group relationships can be witnessed in this participant’s closing remarks: “I believe and know that my life, the way I do things, the way I interact with people will never be the same again”.

**DISCUSSION**

Study abroad offers a host of benefits, including cultural and political awareness, improved attitudes toward dissimilar others, and increased sport business acumen (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Drews Kitsantas, 2004; Lindley, 2005; Vaccaro, 2002). Nevertheless, cultural differences, language barriers, and the preference to be around similar others all have the potential to detract from the overall experience (Ellers & Abrams, 2003; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Jones & Cunningham, 2008; Ryan & Twibell, 2000). In recognizing these potential pitfalls, we drew from intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) to develop a study abroad program emphasizing the four conditions of contact: equal status among study abroad participants, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. We then evaluated, over the period of five weeks, the students’ reactions to one another while participating in the study abroad program.

Our research questions guiding the study focused on the degree to which intergroup friendships (RQ 1), cross-cultural anxiety (RQ 2), and evaluations of out-group members (RQ 3) changed over the course of the study abroad program. Results indicate that while cross-cultural anxiety did not change over the course of the program, intergroup friendships and out-group evaluations did. Students developed more friendships with dissimilar others and had more positive evaluations with those persons as the study abroad program progressed. These findings are further buttressed by the consistency of the results across both the quantitative and qualitative data sources. Note that the pattern of the results is similar to other studies. For instance, Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that evaluations of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals improved as people had more contact with those persons. Similarly, Eller and Abrams (2003) observed that the more contact language school students had with out-group members at school, the more likely they were to also develop interpersonal relationships with and decrease their prejudice toward those persons. Collectively, the findings from the current study, coupled with those from past research, point to the efficacy of intergroup contact in promoting positive intergroup relations, especially when the conditions of contact are in place (Allport, 1954; see Eller & Abrams, 2003).

That cross-cultural anxiety did not decrease over time could be due to the low anxiety that the students had coming
into the program, as evidenced by the low mean scores (see Table 1). This is not to suggest that potential concerns were not held. As outlined in the Results section, one participant expressed concern as to whether religion, status, and language would be a source of strife among the participants (see Jones & Cunningham, 2008, for similar findings in their study). However, these fears were quickly allayed, and the participants came to view their differences as teaching moments.

Implications, limitations, and future directions

The findings presented here also have implications for practice. In following intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), purposeful efforts were made to ensure that students not only interacted closely with each other, but that the conditions of contact were also present. The latter component is especially important. Without, for instance, equal status among group members, power differences among ingroups and out-groups are likely to negatively influence interpersonal interactions. Indeed, DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy (2003) commented that “it seems especially shortsighted for the workforce diversity literature to be inattentive to issues of power and long-term inequality” (p. 482). As another example, the failure to emphasize cooperation and common goals is likely to result in “us” versus “them” distinctions and the subsequent biases that oftentimes accompany such categorization processes (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Finally, the value of institutional support has been demonstrated in several contexts (Cox, 2001; Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2000; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004), all of which suggest that top leaders and managers need to actively demonstrate support for diversity and convivial interpersonal interactions. In short, study abroad program directors (and all managers of diverse entities, for that matter) should emphasize equal status, cooperation, common goals, and top-management support for interpersonal interactions among in-group and out-group members.

Despite the strengths of the study, there are two of potential limitations. First, the sample size is small (N = 20), and there were only three representatives from each of the countries from outside the United States. Thus, broad generalizations should be advanced with caution. We do note, however, that we have the benefit of actual study abroad participants in our study, unlike many of the past studies (e.g., Jones & Cunningham, 2008). Further, that we still found significant effects with such a small sample points to the robustness of the findings. Second, some may question to what degree this is a sport management issue and not just a social psychological one. We counter this critique by noting that study abroad programs continue to grow in popularity in the sport management realm (see Jones & Cunningham, 2008), and one would be hard-pressed to articulate how finding ways to enhance the learning experience of sport management students while
they study abroad (as we did in this study) would not be of interest to sport management faculty.

We also see several potential opportunities for future research. Given that the sample size was a potential limitation of this study, future researchers would do well to increase the number of participants in their studies. Additional research is also needed to understand other factors that could reduce the barriers to study abroad programs. That is, our research focused on strategies used during the program itself; however, research is needed to understand what strategies could be used to make study abroad more enticing for those considering that experience.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, results from this study show that intergroup contact among students studying abroad has many benefits. Recall that differences in language, customs, and preferences are accentuated when studying abroad, thereby potentially resulting in poor experiences for the study abroad participant (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Jones & Cunningham, 2008). Our research shows, though, that this need not be the case. By strategically designing the program to ensure equal status, cooperation, and common goals among the students, evaluation of people who might otherwise be considered out-group members is likely to enhance. We argue that these improved evaluations, coupled with the increased number of intergroup friendships, makes for an improved study abroad experience. Given the importance of study abroad programs such steps are critical.

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