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Tourism and Cultural Understanding in Study Abroad

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Introduction

Tourism has been explained as a modern, social phenomenon with potential to unite people and cultures through intercultural exchange (D'amore, 1988). Many studies have been undertaken to investigate the potential for tourism to advance world peace and there are even centers devoted to the study of peace through tourism. While there are those who refute this claim (Ap & Var, 1990) it can be acknowledged that the simple act of intercultural exchange which takes place during tourism does have potential to promote cultural awareness and in the process improve understanding between different cultures. The tourist has been studied from multiple perspectives including impacts, host-guest relations, attitudes, and economic impact to name a few. A segment that is represented in relatively few studies is the consideration of the study abroad student as a tourist.

Study abroad programs are academic experiences in which a student leaves her or his home country to study in another country for a period of time. While the primary goal is learning, these experiences have nonetheless been referred to as tourist experiences that are more in depth than the usual vacation (Litvin, 2003) due to length abroad and other factors. Programs can range from short-term study tours, which combine academic study with a tour of several different destinations, to programs where a group of students live and go to school together to an immersive independent experience where students are integrated fully to school and everyday life. To take advantage of the time in another country, a main feature of most programs is interaction with the host culture. Whether specifically integrated into the program (homestays, organized events with locals or through the set curriculum) or in less formalized ways (becoming friends with or simply interacting with locals), cross-cultural interactions are a daily event for most students. All of these models offer cultural learning opportunities for students and research has shown that experiences students have while participating in international education programs promotes cultural understanding and cultural competence and often leads to long term changes in attitudes and behaviors. In one notable study, Carlson and Widamann (1988) found that the

students who studied abroad showed significant change in each dimension but primarily in cross-cultural interest and cultural cosmopolitanism. Their study suggests, “that study abroad can be an important contributor to international awareness and potentially contribute to attitudes and behaviors that help foster international understanding” (p.15).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate how the tourist activities and experiences of study abroad participants impacts cultural attitude change and perceived cultural competence. Motives to participate and expectations and outcomes for participants may also be investigated.

Theoretical Framework

Multiple theories and constructs make up the framework for the study. *Contact theory*: In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) put forth his contact theory, also known as inter-group contact theory. Allport asserts that prolonged contact between groups can result in decline of prejudices as lengthy contact between groups will result in groups better understanding one another. The theory is particularly useful when explaining the cultural learning outcomes of study abroad programs. While studying abroad, students often have prolonged and meaningful contact with other groups which has been shown to change their attitudes and behaviors. *Intercultural competence theory*: Contact theory and intercultural competence theory are naturally linked due to the focus on effective communication between different groups. Deardorff (2006) conducted research to establish consensus on the meaning of the term intercultural competency as well as the best way to assess intercultural competence. While the approaches to the two models developed in the study were different, both models contain the same elements necessary to attain intercultural competence such as, cultural awareness, in depth understanding of culture, respect for others, openness to others, adaptability and flexibility. *Cultural distance*: Stated simply, cultural distance refers to the concept that individuals will feel more comfortable with people of cultures that are more similar to their own. Pioneered in the field of international business, cultural distance is similar to the concepts of social identity (Amir & Ben-Ari, 1985; Berno & Ward 2005) and social distance (Nyaupane, Teye and Paris, 2008). The concept has been used in a variety of disciplines and within the tourism field primarily to explain guest and host interaction in tourism services (Moufakkir, 2011) or behavior of travelers (Crotts, 2004).

Literature Review

The benefits for students participating in study abroad are numerous, universal across different countries and across many dimensions including academic (contact with foreign education systems, foreign language acquisition and introduction of different academic subjects), social (opportunity to travel, meet new people, and leave regular life and routine) career (learn about a new field) and cultural (improve knowledge about a foreign country) (Fischer, 2010; Teichler & Steube, 1991). In an effort to hold study abroad programs accountable for increasing participants’ education and cultural understanding, evaluations and assessments have been conducted in many areas including appreciation of cultural differences and attitude toward foreign travel and life. Many studies are providing information that supports the outcomes of cultural awareness and cultural competence for students participating in study abroad programs (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Coelho, 1962; Kitsantas & Meyers 2002; Kitsantas, 2004; Kuh & Kauffman, 1984; McCabe, 1994).

The cultural attitudes, which students have of the host country, have also been studied. Nyaupane, Teye and Paris (2008) used social distance and expectancy theory to explore how pre-trip attitudes are formed and what causes these attitudes to change. Interestingly, high pre-trip expectations were attributed to a post-trip negative attitude towards the host culture. In addition it was expected that social distance to the host culture would figure importantly in forming pre-trip and post-trip attitudes to the host culture. While they found that social distance did contribute to pre-trip attitudes, the relationship to post-trip attitudes was weak.

Kitsantis (2004) focused specifically on student reasons to study abroad and the resulting outcomes on the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding. Administering a pre and post-test assessing goals for participating in study abroad and cross-cultural skills, the results of the study indicated that cross-cultural skills and global understanding did improve for students after completion of the study abroad program. She states that the results of her study “demonstrated that study abroad programs significantly, contribute to the preparation of students to function in a multicultural world and promote international understanding.” (p.447). Kitsantis further looked at how participant goals impacted the outcomes of development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding. She found that specifically the goal to gain cross-cultural competence as expressed by the student was the only factor, which could predict improvement in students’ global understanding and cross-cultural skills.

Proposed Methods

Due to the nature of the topic a mixed methods research design will be employed. This decision is validated in the literature as in her study, Deardorff (2006) determined through her work with intercultural scholars that the most effective way to assess intercultural competency was through a mixed methods approach. An assessment of a large number of participants through the administration of a pre-trip and post-trip questionnaire will ensure the information gathered can be analyzed and used to better understand participant motives, expectations and outcomes. In addition, the use of qualitative methods will be necessary due to the nature of the questions asked. This is a personal topic. In her study of students studying in France for the summer, Wilkinson (1998) deliberately chose a qualitative research design in order to draw out the experiences of the students and how they were inevitably embedded in their own values and beliefs. In addition, McCabe (1994) found the subject matter of developing cultural understanding, or as he calls it a global perspective, more suitable to qualitative research methods. The way an individual feels about another culture and about their own ability to navigate and feel comfortable in another culture is influenced both by their past experiences and their present surroundings.

The study will be conducted in two parts consisting of a qualitative project in summer 2012 and a mixed methods project in spring and summer 2013. For the qualitative portion of the study, a photo elicitation project will be conducted. The project will involve up to 40 students participating in a study abroad program during summer 2012. Participants will be asked to provide up to 10 photos, which best represent their experiences in another culture. Subsequent interviews on their photo choices will be conducted to clarify and validate the meanings of the photos to the individual. Photo elicitation is particularly useful in this context as summed up by Harper (2002), “That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk” (p.11).

For the mixed methods portion of the study, a pre-test will be administered online before students study abroad to assess their cultural attitudes to the host culture and cultural competence

and a similar post-test will be administered online after the study abroad program has finished assessing the impact of their tourist activities and experiences. In this study the independent variable is participation in the study abroad program and the dependent variable is the cultural attitudes and perceived cultural competence of the participant. These variables will be measured through the online questionnaire developed by the researcher based on the literature, past research and the findings of the photo elicitation study to be conducted in the summer of 2012. The online questionnaire will include a series of questions investigating cultural attitudes and competence on a Likert scale and other methods such as unordered response. Open-ended questions may also be used. As well, the words and the context in which they are used will be important when determining whether or not a relationship exists between study abroad participation and cultural attitudes and competence. For this reason an online writing exercise using email, blogs, journals, twitter, or Facebook with up to 40 participants will be conducted in both the spring and summer of 2013.

The sample will not be random but instead all participants in a study abroad program over a specific period of time will be invited to participate in the study. The potential population size is between 1200 – 1600 students. We expect at least 300 respondents to the pre and post-test. Of all the participants who respond to the original questionnaire, a stratified purposeful sample of respondents to the questionnaire will be asked to participate in a qualitative exercise to be determined. The stratified sample will seek to proportionally represent the various models, destinations and academic programs of study for study abroad. In addition, students who respond to the pre-test will have the opportunity to complete the post-test.

Expected outcomes

Many studies have provided information that supports the benefits of cultural competence and global understanding of study abroad programs. Based on this literature on the subject it is expected the findings will show that the experiences students have while studying abroad does contribute to shifts in cultural attitudes and perceived cultural competence of participants. However due to the variety in programs offered and personal background of individuals it is possible there will be differences, which develops in an individual.

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