

Challenges Experienced by Students during Study Abroad: Implications for Family Science Faculty

Sarah Taylor, PhD, Tiffany L. Brown, PhD, Nilufer Medora, PhD

Introduction

- A common way for family science students to develop an awareness of cultural similarities and differences is through study abroad programs (e.g., Harris et al., 2019).
- Understanding student challenges during study abroad may support Family Science faculty to develop and deliver study abroad programs that are more effective at bringing cultural elements to the family science curriculum.
- **Research question:** What challenges do students experience on a semester-long study abroad program?

Methods

Participants

- 80 students on the Semester at Sea study abroad program
- Ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old; majority were female (87%)
- The Semester at Sea study abroad program is conducted on a cruise ship that visits 10 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and North America over a 4-month span.
- The program provides in-depth cultural immersion, experiential learning, and a sense of international community.



Data Collection & Analysis

- Participants responded to an open-ended survey question: “What were the challenges that you experienced during the study abroad experience.”
- Three researchers analyzed the written comments using qualitative content analysis techniques.
- Code were assigned based on dominant messages and then combined into broader themes.

Results

Theme	Example Response
Cognitive Challenges	“There were some instances where I put myself in a dangerous position without realizing it. My biggest challenge was realizing I wasn’t as competent of a traveler as I thought I was....”
	“Uncertainty about places, experiences, people. Fears about stereotypes.”
Social Challenges	“There were many high stress situations right off the bat that were hard to handle when you are with a new group of people [and] are not sure how they might react.”
	“Finding people who had traveled before, people with the same mentality that were open to travel locally without fear. Overall finding your clique and a group, which you truly fit in with, was difficult.”
Academic Challenges	“I found it challenging to balance school work and country time, especially as I would come back from most countries exhausted and unable to focus.”
	“Trying to communicate with my home university about registration and keeping up with school work.”
	“Challenges included studies. Mostly professors who treated “Semester at Sea” classes like they would treat a home university which isn’t the way it is supposed to be. A lot of professors were competent enough to see the differences and made changes that benefitted their students tremendously....”
Cultural Challenges	“Language barrier, coping with immense poverty, and knowing I could not help make a large difference right away.”
	“Adjusting to different cultures and their life styles and ways of living. Also seeing their living conditions compared to mine.”
	“Figuring out what is appropriate in each culture. Learning how to get around in each country. Learning that being uncomfortable is ‘okay.’”
Logistical Challenges	“Food on the trip gets boring. The rocking of the ship can make you very sleepy.”
	“Sometimes it was difficult to eat because I am vegetarian, but I know it’s my choice and I make it work.”
Emotional Challenges	“Travelers’ guilt was my biggest enemy on this trip.”

Discussion & Implications

- This study expands research on challenges related to study abroad and provides implications for study abroad curriculum and delivery methods.
- Study abroad programs should underscore students’ cognitive preparations. Family science faculty should foster open-mindedness, flexibility, and sensitivity to help address challenges reported by students in this study. These skills may also support students in their future work with diverse families.
- Few participants reported challenges related to a lack of financial resources, which is consistent with broader trends where students with financial means are more likely to study abroad (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010). Faculty must address this negative space and intentionally recruit ethnic minority students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Findings on social challenges suggest faculty should foster stronger relational connections among students in the programs. This could be supported with collaborative projects and team building exercises.



Contact Information

- References available upon request.
- For more information, please contact Dr. Sarah Taylor at sarah.taylor@csulb.edu