

Engaging Psychology Students in Cross-Cultural Research While Abroad

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In the past 20 years, the discipline of psychology has thoroughly embraced “culture” as an important variable in helping us understand psychological phenomena. You can see this in our textbooks, in the courses we offer, and in the explosion of published research that examines variables like collectivism and individualism.

Psychologists today also worry about the extent to which psychological models generalize or don’t generalize across cultural and ethnic groups. Some psychological models generalize exceptionally well (like the relationship between reinforcement and learning). Some models generalize fairly well (Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, for example) and some models don’t seem to generalize at all (like Freud’s Oedipus complex).

While the field as a whole has incorporated considerations of culture, undergraduate students have relatively few opportunities to learn directly about cultural psychology and cross-cultural research. Our students must learn, for the most part, by reading and listening instead of by doing.

Four years ago, my department established a study abroad program for students who want to learn more about cultural psychology and who want to conduct their own comparative research. I’d like to discuss some of the opportunities and challenges that arise when a psychology department decides to add a research-based, study abroad component to its curriculum.

Beloit College’s Study Abroad Program in Estonia and Morocco

Before I do that, let me briefly describe our program, which is unique as far as we know. Students and a faculty director live and study in two countries—8 weeks in Tartu, Estonia, and 8 weeks in Fez, Morocco. The students live with host families. They take language and culture courses from local instructors. The faculty director teaches a course in cultural psychology that spans the two halves of the program. The director also supervises the students’ research projects. Before the program, students must complete three courses: the beginning course in psychology, a course in statistics, and a course in research methods. During the program, students formulate a hypothesis, design a study, and then collect data in Estonia and Morocco (and sometimes here at home). Let me read three project titles so you can get a feel for the kinds of research the students are doing.

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- “The Influence of Religiosity and Western Media Exposure on Attitudes toward Dating among Estonian and Moroccan Adolescents” by Neva Garner and Kendra Morgan
- “Prototypical Descriptions of LOVE in Estonia, Morocco, and the United States” by Sarah Barnard and David Greenberg
- “Examining the Physical Attractiveness Stereotype in Estonia and Morocco” by Nathaniel Patton

Benefits and Opportunities

What are some of the benefits and opportunities associated with the program? I won’t say much about the generic ways in which students benefit because you’re already familiar with the benefits of study abroad. Very briefly, students:

- acquire a global perspective and better understand their position in the world;
- learn to acknowledge difference and diversity as a normal and positive part of contemporary life;
- learn to appreciate the role that language plays in culture and the value of learning a foreign language;
- become more mature and more confident as they learn to navigate and solve problems in new lands;
- and gain skills in intercultural communication that will aid them in their future lives and careers.

Having said that, we believe students who participate in this kind of program—a research-based program that focuses on cultural psychology and spans two different countries—we believe students benefit in additional ways that are specific to the program. I’ve got these numbered—and there are four of them.

First, students learn cultural psychology by living it. They’re highly motivated to read about, think about, and discuss issues in cultural psychology because many of the concepts (e.g., culture shock, attribution errors, personal space, and gender roles) have immediate relevance for them. Cultural psychologists often analyze the well-meaning clashes that occur when individuals from different backgrounds interact with each other. It’s one thing to read about a well-meaning clash and quite another to experience it personally. As visitors to Estonia and Morocco, our students experience their share of misunderstandings. These provide invaluable grist for class discussions and help the students grow personally.

Second, students begin to understand how theories and research procedures have to be modified when they involve persons from other cultures. They have an opportunity to investigate the impact of culture in ways that would not be possible at home. They struggle with methodological issues (like translation, sample equivalence, and metric equivalence) that, if they were at home, would be just another topic printed in bold in the textbook.

Along these same lines, our students have an opportunity to conduct research with Estonian and Moroccan students. We haven't worked out all the logistical kinks yet, but it's important that we do because the best comparative studies usually result from collaborative efforts. Even under the best of circumstances, the meaning of behavior is often ambiguous, but the odds of achieving metric equivalence are much higher if the research team includes individuals from the culture to be studied. As a researcher, you learn a lot when someone challenges your assumptions about the meaning of a construct or about the best way to measure that construct. Here's a simple illustration. Suppose a student wants to measure helping behavior by standing on a street corner, puzzling over a map, and recording how much time passes before someone offers to help her find her way. This is a technique that's been used in the United States, but it probably shouldn't be used in some other countries. An Estonian would immediately recognize that the measure has poor validity because Estonians are typically reserved and respect the privacy of others, even in public. A Moroccan would point out that, when a young woman is puzzling over a map, young Moroccan men will come to her aid but probably not because they're altruistically motivated.

Third, the faculty director benefits from participation in the program. The director comes to understand the cultural features of psychology in a way that's rooted in personal experience instead of book learning. The faculty director also has an opportunity to establish collaborative research projects with colleagues in the host countries.

Fourth, at the risk of sounding crass, the College has an opportunity to benefit financially. Our program in Estonia and Morocco attracts more students from other colleges than all our other study abroad programs combined. Lots of colleges and universities have language-based programs, but how many have research-based programs that span two countries?

Difficulties and Challenges

OK, let's talk about difficulties and challenges. Given that the program is located in two countries, some of the difficulties are obvious. Think about the administrative chores. Contracts, agreements, budgets, arranging host families, hiring local staff, checking health and security advisories—all these things have to be done twice. Also, the program is more expensive—more expensive for the College and more expensive for the students because they have to pay for three legs of travel instead of two.

So why two countries? Well, cultural psychologists aim to discover the universal aspects and the culture-specific aspects of psychological functioning. As a general rule, every psychological phenomenon has both an etic, universal component and an emic, culture-specific component.² To identify etics and emics, it's enormously useful to have at least three objects (or points or targets) of comparison. When you're limited to two targets, you naturally focus on differences. But with three targets, it's possible to say that A and B are similar to each other and different from C. It's not possible to engage in this kind of analysis with only two targets. Michael Scriven, the philosopher of science, has called this kind of analysis “triangulation in evidential

² For example, students everywhere learn faster when they are rewarded for correct performances. This is an etic. In some cultures (e.g., Japan), students learn faster when the student's teacher is rewarded for the student's correct performance. (“My teacher's success is also my success.”) This is an emic.

space.” By living and studying in three countries (the U.S. and two others), our students are able to “triangulate.”

Are any two countries as good as any other two? Probably not. Maybe the countries should be similar to each other in important ways; maybe they should share a common language, for example. Or maybe the countries should be maximally different on certain dimensions. The best solution, of course, will depend on the particular nature of the program. In our case, Estonia and Morocco differ from each other in ways that are useful pedagogically. Social scientists sometimes describe cultures in terms of where they fall along particular dimensions. Estonia and Morocco are positioned at opposite ends of three of these dimensions: collectivism vs. individualism, high-contact vs. low-contact, and vertical vs. horizontal power structures. As a result, the two countries are unusually instructive “cases” for a cultural psychologist. At the same time, our students aren’t able to study Estonian or Moroccan Arabic before the program—and they only learn enough language while they’re in each country to get by on the street and to have simple conversations with their host families.

This leads us to another question. Can students conduct meaningful research when they’re not fluent in the local language? In one sense, the answer is clearly no, they cannot. Not unless they receive help from staff on site—help with translations, help in gaining access to participants, help in getting past stereotypes and unpacking the suitcase we call “culture.”

But the answer can also be “yes.” Even when students are not fluent in the language, they can do an observational study. One of the most interesting studies to come out of our program was a study of open-air markets. Two students documented very clear differences in how often customers and vendors touched each other and how often they touched the produce. Their study served as a nice empirical test of the hypothesis that says Morocco is a high-contact culture, Estonia is a low-contact culture, and the United States is somewhere in-between.

Another question: Can students formulate a meaningful research question when they initially know so little about Estonians and Moroccans? It’s really difficult. So the faculty director has to help a lot and has to provide students with carefully selected readings before departure. There’s also another path that can be taken. There are many psychological findings that have never been replicated outside the United States because no one has tried to replicate them. Students can select a study that’s fairly simple in its requirements and then repeat the study using Estonian and Moroccan samples. If the study has enough statistical power, then a null result is at least as interesting as a positive result.

Researchers need access to library collections and electronic databases. Can students access these while overseas? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depends on the country. In our case, we intentionally locate in Tartu first because students need to conduct their literature reviews early on and Tartu provides better access than we can get in Fez. Our library’s web site has a “back door” that allows authorized users to access the catalog and electronic databases from anywhere in the world.

One problem we haven’t solved yet is the problem of when students will analyze their data and write their research report. In Fez, students have very limited access to computers. There are

cyber-café, but it's really expensive to spend hours in a cyber-café, writing a research report in APA style. Our solution has been to allow students to complete their analyses and their research reports when they get home, but that means the faculty director has to "ride herd" on the students to make sure they finish within a reasonable period of time.

Yesterday, Guadalupe talked about culture shock. Do students on a program like ours experience culture shock twice instead of once? Yeah, many of them do, although I think culture shock is a misleading name for what is really stress due to the unfamiliar. On our program, students get acclimated to one location, begin to feel comfortable, and then pick up and move to another location. Some might see this as a weakness of the program, but we see it as an asset. Knowing how to cope with the unfamiliar is a skill that can be learned like any other skill. The trick is to become aware of your emotional reaction, intellectually reflect on its cause (which makes the emotional reaction subside), and then observe carefully in order to develop appropriate expectations for the next time. By living in Estonia first, where some things are familiar and some are not, the students learn how to cope with a degree of unfamiliarity that's still within their comfort zone. Then they're ready to tackle the greater challenge of adapting to "exotic" Morocco, which initially would have been way outside their comfort zone.

Finally, can a program like ours be successful without a faculty director? After all, it costs money to send a faculty director overseas and the faculty member is not able to teach or advise students on campus during the time of the program. We believe a faculty director is absolutely essential to the success of the program. The faculty director provides continuity across the two "halves" of the program and across the two "halves" of the research project. It's the faculty director who helps students deal with culture shock, who helps students make connections between their experiences in Estonia and Morocco, and who helps students situate those experiences within a larger conceptual framework.

Conclusion

I feel like I've been talking for too long, so let me just conclude by saying that a study abroad program that includes a comparative research component presents many challenges. But at the same time, students have an opportunity to develop particular skills and particular understandings that probably can't be developed to the same degree at home. Thanks for listening.