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Beyond U.S. Borders: Impact of a Study Abroad Institute on Counselors' Multicultural Competencies

Paper based on a program presented at the 2011 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Nashville, TN, October 28, 2011.

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The infusion of culture into counseling has now been established as a valid and important endeavor. Multicultural counseling competencies have been written (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). National multicultural standards for counseling program accreditation have also been set (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009). In line with the goal of producing multiculturally competent counselors, courses, and other training programs have been created (e.g., Marbley, Steele, & McAuliffe, 2011; Vázquez & García-Vázquez, 2003). These are good beginnings. Nevertheless, the nature and effectiveness of multicultural counselor training is uncertain (Fier & Ramsey, 2005).

Attempts to study multicultural counselor training have been largely quantitative in nature (Malott, 2010). A variety of self-report survey instruments have been used (e.g., Castillo et al., 2007; Coleman, Morris, & Norton, 2006; Murphy, Park, & Lonsdale, 2006). Findings have been generally positive in terms of enhanced racial identity and multicultural competence. By contrast, there has been little qualitative research on multicultural counselor training, despite its being called for as a rich source of information (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000).

In the research that has been done, one factor has stood out: Personal experience with cultural others is a powerful way of affecting multicultural competence (Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Guth & McDonnell, 2006). For example, Diaz-Lazaro and Cohen (2001) conducted a quantitative and qualitative study that explored the impact of a

specific course in multicultural counseling. The authors found that cross-cultural contact (i.e., guest speakers) helped students develop multicultural knowledge and skills but did not influence their self-awareness. Guth and McDonnell (2006) utilized a survey to assess counseling students' perceptions of multicultural and diversity training. One of their findings was that greater knowledge seemed to be gained from personal interactions outside of courses. These studies were limited in scope since they only examined the impact of programs that were in the United States.

The power of personal cross-cultural contact is intriguing. It begs the question, "What are the effects of an intentional international counselor education experience on multicultural competence?" However, no research has been found in this potentially rich area.

In fact, study abroad programs are not commonly studied in general. Hadis (2005) attributes this lack to the press of putting on study abroad experiences at the expense of outcome research. Most of the literature on the impact of study abroad programs has been in disciplines other than counseling, such as business (Black & Duhon, 2006), nursing (Inglis, Rolls, & Kristy, 1998), and language acquisition (Davidson, 2007). Moreover, the study abroad research has primarily focused on the experiences of undergraduate university students (Drew & Meyer, 1996; Hadis, 2005), neglecting the experiences of graduate students. The findings from the undergraduate study abroad research indicates that undergraduates develop personally, grow intellectually, and acquire global-mindedness (e.g., Carlson, Barber, & Burn, 1991) as a result of study abroad.

One counseling related study was found (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004) that examined the impact of a short-term study abroad experience in Ireland. The authors conducted a series of four focus groups with seven graduate student participants. The focus group questions explored students' assumptions, learning expectations, and knowledge of differences and similarities among U.S., Irish, and Northern Irish cultures. The findings suggested that this program was helpful in two ways: (1) increasing students' knowledge of Ireland's culture through experiential learning and interactions, and (2) increasing their self-awareness and tolerance of others by living abroad with fellow travelers.

With the power of personal cross-cultural contact in mind, and the limited study abroad research in counselor education, the current research study sought to assess the impact of a study abroad experience on graduate counseling students and counselors. This research explored the question: What is the impact of a study abroad institute on participants' multicultural awareness of self, knowledge of others, and skills in working with culturally diverse individuals? The proposed research was designed to expand on Jurgens and McAuliffe's previous study by discovering the impact of a more intentional multicultural study abroad counseling experience, again in Ireland. (Note: Ireland will here refer to both the Irish Republic and the province of Northern Ireland, which are separate political entities.) Unlike Jurgens and McAuliffe's study, the current study examined the influence of the study abroad experience on multicultural counseling competency (cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills).

The Diversity and Counseling Institute in Ireland

The Diversity and Counseling Institute in Ireland (DCII) was organized as a way of intentionally expanding students' lenses on social issues and counseling approaches in Ireland. It aimed at helping Americans know themselves better by knowing others. This institute was developed by the second author in order to have participants learn about another culture in three ways. Participants learned about: (1) Irish social issues such as ethnic conflict, immigration, sexual orientation, racism, and poverty, (2) the counseling profession and other helping initiatives in Ireland, and (3) the people and customs of Ireland.

The previously-mentioned experiences were planned into the Institute. For example, guest speakers were brought in to describe Irish social issues and counseling history and training. Participants also interacted and learned from Irish counselors, cultural experts, and community activists. Additionally, participants spent much of a day as individuals or small groups visiting Irish counseling agencies and social programs, interviewing Irish counseling professionals.

During the two weeks abroad, Irish and Northern Irish scholars and community workers led discussions with the participants about dealing with cultural-related social problems and solutions. Approaches to suicide prevention programs, intimate partner abuse centers, university counseling, school integration efforts, peacemaking, intercultural contact, community activism, and crisis management in both Ireland and Northern Ireland were covered. The goals of the (DCII) were to increase participants' awareness of their own cultural heritage; knowledge of American, Irish, and British cultural perspectives; and understanding of culturally-appropriate intervention strategies.

Specific Components. The Institute consisted of the following specific elements:

- Two guest lectures by Irish experts on history, culture, and language.
- Two guest lectures by Irish counseling leaders on the state of Irish counseling.
- Six lectures on Irish social issues and programs, such as partner abuse, suicide, and substance abuse.
- Four sessions facilitated by the second author on the nature of culture, cultural relativism, and key practices in culturally alert counseling.
- Discussions of the lectures and other experiences in the large group and reflections on the nature of culture and the personal impact of the study abroad experience.
- Informal cultural encounters through visits to pubs, shops, restaurants, and historical/cultural sites.
- A full-day trip to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to learn about ethnic and religious conflict, including expert presentations on sectarian conflict, walking tours of sectarian neighborhoods, and a visit to and lecture about the Northern Ireland school integration program.
- Cultural immersion activity and interview. Participants engaged in a cultural immersion activity while in Ireland in which they visited an Irish counseling agency and interviewed staff members.

Method

The data collected for this study was part of a broader research project related to the impact of a study abroad experience in Ireland. This study focuses on the qualitative component of the project.

Participants

Six individuals out of 23 total participants volunteered to engage in two interviews. The participants were 50% female, 50% male; 67% heterosexual, 17% gay, 17% bisexual; and 100% Caucasian. Participants were 83% graduate students and 17% counselors. The average age was 37 years (range 24-60).

Procedure

Participants were interviewed on the first day and last day of their stay at the Institute. See Appendix A for the interview guide. Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed. Coding was done by two counselor educators and an audit was done by a graduate student of counseling. The method used was a generic qualitative method.

Analysis

The overall analytic process followed a “generic” qualitative approach, as described by McLeod (2001). The specific method consisted of inductive analysis (Patton, 2002), with code-to-theme protocols guided by the grounded theory method of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and from Skovholt and Rønnestad’s (1992) modified constant comparative process. In this study, two researchers analyzed the participant interviews and separately coded them into initial field notes, then initial codes, then sub-themes, and, finally, into broader, more inclusive themes. The researchers achieved consensus at each level. Data that did not fit into the themes were noted and retained. The second author then assigned names to the final themes and formed definitions for each theme by reviewing the data. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the possible discoveries from this research, an adaptation of the “consensual qualitative method” (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997) was used to check on collusive interpretations and avoidances. An advanced graduate student conducted an audit of the data analysis and of the logic and evidence for the themes.

Findings

Three overarching themes were named from the post-trip data. They might be considered outcomes of the study abroad experience. The first is Personal Growth, with two subthemes, namely (1) Self Knowledge and (2) Discovering and Increasing Autonomy. The second major theme was Learning About Own Culture by Learning About Others’ Cultures. The final theme was Transfer of the Study Abroad Learning to Counseling.

1. Personal Growth

This theme is defined as recognition of one’s interpersonal behaviors, personality tendencies, and increased autonomy. The personal growth theme parallels previous

findings by Carlson et al. (1991) and Hadis (2005). This theme was divided into the two aforementioned subthemes.

Self-Knowledge. The first subtheme of Personal Growth, namely Self-Knowledge, consisted of students' recognition of personal attitudes, tendencies, and behaviors of which they had previously been unaware. Students' expanded self-knowledge came mostly from the intensive interactions with fellow study abroad participants, rather than encounters with Irish people or other experiences. Study abroad can be considered to be an intensive human relations lab, with participants living together in unfamiliar environments. They experience emotions and try new behaviors that they might not otherwise attempt. That experience triggers self-reflection that might not occur as easily in more familiar and less intense surroundings. Some of these self-knowledge discoveries were triggers for new behaviors. Others were merely recognitions of one's own characteristics. Following are examples of discoveries in the area of Self-Knowledge.

"I realized that I need to stop being such a loner."

"The interest of the others in the group helped me reach out and do more things than I would have done had it just been myself."

"It made me realize that I still hate being around a lot of people at one time...in small spaces."

"I found that there were people in the group that I seemed to connect better with."

All of these reflections fall into Weinstein and Alschuler's (1985) notion of "transformational self-knowledge," in contrast to more concrete "elemental" and "situational" self-knowledge. Using Weinstein and Alschuler's language, people at the Transformational stage of self-knowledge can "describe how they consciously monitor, modify, or manage their inner patterns of response" (p. 21). Participants in this study were consciously monitoring, and some were modifying, the behaviors that they became aware of because of the intensity of the group experience. They seemed able to stop negative reactions.

These qualities are important for doing counseling. Self-monitoring of inner states and the ability to modify them allows counselors to empathically hear clients and avoid projecting their immediate reactions.

Discovering and Increasing Autonomy. In this study a number of students remarked on their new-found ability to be mobile in pursuit of a goal. Increasing autonomy is also a theme in other study abroad outcome research (e.g., Carlson et al., 1991; Hadis, 2005). This second subtheme of Personal Growth parallels Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) developmental task for undergraduate college students, which he called "Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence." Chickering and Reisser (1993) defined this task as learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions. Increased autonomy is associated with cognitive development in the form of, for example, what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) called procedural knowing. Such a way of knowing consists of the ability to make decisions based on one's own criteria and methods. Such thinking is important for counselors, as it is associated

with superior skills and decision-making in counseling sessions (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006).

The requirements of being in a foreign country seemed to provide a rich environment for increasing autonomy. Here are some representative quotes of that phenomenon:

“I’m not used to big cities, but I actually have learned within a tight concentric circle around campus how to navigate by myself and do it comfortably...um...which actually I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to do that. I was like kind of expecting to go with people and kind of get my way around. But there were times where that didn’t work out and I was kind of my own. So it was like, “Well, I can get around.” ... that taught me something about myself...that just because you’re in a big city and you’re kind of in an experience by yourself or learn new streets or whatever that I can do that.”

“And knowing that sometimes being in a strange country and knowing that I am feeling like I’m not sure I’m doing something right, just ask somebody.”

“I would strike up conversations with people. Which is a little different for me. I mean just randomly selecting a person and walking up to them is not something I normally do.”

“It changed my awareness of myself that my priorities are different than I thought they were. I don’t really feel pressured to do what other people want to do, certainly more so than it ever has in the past ’cause I just kinda do what I want to do... And let other people do what they want to do. It doesn’t bother me as much.”

These comments don’t necessarily represent a sudden sea change in participants’ sense of autonomy. However, the study abroad experience seemed to trigger or enhance behavioral and emotional autonomy for a number of participants. Such change does not occur at one moment. Instead, in Chickering & Reisser’s (1997) words, “While some epiphanies are dramatic and sudden, most occur gradually and incrementally. We may not know for years that a single lecture or conversation or experience started a chain reaction that transformed some aspect of ourselves” (p. 11). These participants discovered or confirmed their autonomy by the challenge of finding their way and depending on themselves.

2. Learning About Own Culture Through Learning About Others’ Cultures

This theme is defined as increasing awareness of one’s own cultural identity through immersion in a different culture. It seemed that the Ireland immersion heightened participants’ overall alertness to the influence of culture in human thought and action. Two inseparable threads were woven through this theme: learning about others’ culture and learning about one’s own. Experiencing Irish culture provided a basis for recognizing one’s “Americanness” for many participants. They began to know themselves through knowing others.

Participants highlighted communication styles, attitudes toward alcohol, education systems, religious attitudes, and comfort with personal space. Some sample quotes for this phenomenon of learning about one's own culture through experiencing that of another follow.

"You can't help but think of your culture when you're immersed in another culture...what your day to day—what you're used to."

"This is still a very relational country. ...as opposed to how I feel when I'm walking around the streets in America. I don't feel like I can just walk up to somebody and be like let's have a conversation about where I'm going or what I'm doing. As opposed to here, if I start a conversation with somebody... or if somebody starts a conversation with me."

"Their education system. It's a lot more stress to get into a career that you really want because they base it more on the scores [on national tests] than on what you want to do. So I think it's given me more appreciation for ours. I feel like we have more freedom on our educational paths for the most part."

"Personal space. I see it when you go out to the pubs cause it gets crowded and nobody seems to mind. It's just they are all just used to being in a big crowds a lot more and I am used to having a little more space. So I guess the sense of personal space and not really feeling like anybody was invading it."

"One thing that gets me is that here it's church and state are mixed so here it's that religion is probably a little bit more impactful than what it is in the states."

"I saw just how much the social culture is ingrained by going into the pubs and seeing how people interact and, even if I'm just drinking water I still felt like I was a part of something bigger and more integrative and that was really big for me."

"The drinking problem. I really noticed that the drinking problem here... It may be greater than what it is for the U.S. as a whole."

"In meeting some of the Irish I can realize they are not different than myself and yet there is also these subtle differences that run very deep. An attitude towards alcohol and an attitude towards religion. The people I've met it's more almost an anti-religion attitude."

It should be noted that there were a number of quotes about cultural differences that did not connect with learning about American culture. That was especially true in the area of ethnic/religious conflict in Ireland.

"Especially when we went to Belfast ... cause it was always a puzzle to me why there had always and continued to be a conflict up there. I have a lot better understanding of that. Between the different religions and the different nations that they both claim."

“The conflicts between, you know, Northern Ireland and Ireland has never been really clear to me. Like my parents are Protestant and Catholic and someone had always told me they shouldn’t be together, you know, because they’re Protestant and Catholic. And I never really like conceptualized it and I do now and in that way I think understand a lot more about Irish culture.”

All of these quotes indicate that participants had a heightened sense of the power of culture in people’s lives. For counselors, such alertness to the power of culture is essential if the field is to move from an exclusive emphasis on individuals to recognition of the “social-in-the-individual” McAuliffe, Danner, Grothaus, & Doyle, 2008, p. 48).

In addition, participants seemed to develop greater cultural relativism, which Bennett (1993) describes as “the assumption that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context” (p. 46). This relativistic view contrasts to an individual assuming that American customs are the norm, or superior, or essences, rather than one culture’s set of adaptations to its environment.

Finally, since participants didn’t seem to connect the ethnic divisions in Belfast to ethnic tensions in the United States, a recommendation for future study abroad is explicitly to help participants generalize these observations to areas of American cultural conflict, such as ethnic and racial divisions in the United States.

3. Transfer of Learning to Counseling

Five out of six interviewees noted that the study abroad experience resulted in an increased ability to work with others from different cultures. The impact might be described as increased “cultural empathy,” that is, an expanded sensitivity to the importance of another’s culture-related experience. One subtheme was participants’ heightened alertness to cultural differences. For example:

“Just the cultural differences altogether [had an impact on my view of counseling]. It’s going to be helpful, I think, when I get into practice and trying to understand how people are probably nothing like me and I’ve got to appreciate that.”

“It’s [the study abroad experience] given me the opportunity to be more cognizant, be more aware of the differences in people. Especially with the people who live here [in Ireland] and trying to tiptoe around the cultural differences that I was uncomfortable with. Especially at first and making sure I wasn’t insulting.”

In particular, the experience of being a minority (i.e., an American) amidst a majority (i.e., the Irish) affected some participants. Here is an illustrative quote:

“Being an American, I’m the minority in this country. It’s definitely being the outsider. I mean I can’t fake an Irish accent, so it’s obvious when I talk that I’m not a native of this country. And it’s a little uncomfortable at times. So if someone’s coming to me as a client from any other different cultural [group], one thing I feel like I have to remind myself is this is a whole different new role for them.”

In that same vein of alertness to cultural difference, there was increased awareness of the subtlety of cultural differences, even when another person looks like oneself.

“It’s very possible even if they [clients] look exactly like you that they could be of a different culture.”

In that quote the participant shows awareness of invisible culture. The next quote also emphasizes subtle differences that must be unearthed through observation, information, and inquiry.

“It’s deepened my ability to attend to, and therefore give value to, the subtle difference. So often I look for how you and I are similar because that makes me comfortable... and of course that’s valuable information too, but it’s also just as important to look for how you and I are dissimilar so I that I don’t make assumptions. It’s a knowledge I already had because I’m working in the profession, but there is an extra layer of understanding of the cultural differences that has been added because of this trip.”

By contrast to awareness of difference, some participants were alerted to the commonalities among people and to the danger of stereotyping that can occur when paying attention to culture in counseling.

“Cultures aren’t that different. There are definitely differences but it seems to me if you enter a counseling relationship without a predisposed expectation... like if I entered an Irish counseling relationship expecting that the problem is automatically going to be substance abuse I would probably be disappointed nine times out of ten.”

Such differences and similarities cannot be gleaned merely by knowing of another’s culture. One participant expressed the need to inquire about culture instead of stereotyping.

[I need to keep] reminding myself [that when I am] working with anybody [that] I don’t know—not even half of where they’re from or what made up their life or their culture—and so being a lot more open about it. [I need to be] a lot slower to assume things and to judge things and just [instead] go, “Well, can you explain a little bit more of that?”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study abroad experience for the participants who were interviewed resulted in a type of learning that might not occur in a standard course in culture and counseling. Each end-of-trip theme was related to the experience of both being in a new environment with a group of peers and of experiencing a culture in person. Those two themes pervade the study abroad literature, that is, the interpersonal encounter with fellow travelers and the encounters with the culture in a foreign environment. The self-knowledge and autonomy that were gained from the experience are not as likely in a “safe” home environment. Thus, the intensity of the group encounter tested participants’ assumptions

about themselves and stretched them to engage in adventuring both interpersonally and physically. Such self-knowledge and autonomy would serve counselors well in their work. The second theme of learning about culture and its role in human meaning-making was, of course, the original purpose of the trip. Thus, theme two served the purpose of placing participants in a “foreign” culture so that they might relativize their own culture; recognize the power of culture to inform individuals’ values, communication, and lifestyle; gain perspectives on their own culture, and learn the particulars of another culture. It seemed that the richness of a 10-day immersion into Ireland created a more powerful learning experience than would one at a home campus. It is noteworthy that participants noted both human similarities and differences, which is a distinction that counselors must make with clients. Counselors must see the universal and the particular in clients, avoiding stereotyping.

There are lessons to be learned from this study on how to increase the value of such study abroad. Participants wanted more day-to-day contact with Irish people. While that has been a challenge for study abroad in general, it is possible to have students stay in homes, or spend a day on their own in a small village. The visits to agencies were a good introduction to such closer contact, as were informal visits in the evenings to pubs, where participants met locals.

In addition, the limitations of this study should be noted. For example, there was a small sample size from one study abroad experience in Ireland. Future research could seek to replicate these findings with a larger sample size. Additionally, the impact of study abroad experiences in other countries could be explored to determine the impact of the experience on participants’ multicultural competencies.

In sum, study abroad for counselors seems to be a “value-added” experience for learning about the place of culture in human meaning-making. The study abroad experience helped to increase the awareness, knowledge, and skills of the participants. It was a vivid introduction to cultural alertness, and, with enhancement, seems to be a very worthwhile intense immersion into the cultural dimension of human life and ultimately enhances participant’s multicultural counseling competencies.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A

Ireland Study Interview Questions

Arrival Interview

1. What are your learning goals for this study abroad institute in Ireland?
2. What are your thoughts since arriving in Ireland?
3. What are your feelings since arriving?
4. What are initial cultural similarities and differences between Ireland and the United States that you have noticed since arriving?
5. How knowledgeable do you believe you are about Irish culture?

Departure Interview

1. Were the goals that you had at the beginning of the study abroad institute met by the conclusion? Please describe.
2. Describe the conclusions you've reached about your own personal/cultural perspectives as a result of the experience in Ireland.
3. Describe the impact that living and being with the study abroad group had on you.
4. Describe how the study abroad experience influenced/affected your view of yourself.
5. What are cultural similarities and differences between Ireland and the United States that you have noticed?
6. How has this study abroad institute affected your awareness of yourself?
7. How has this study abroad institute influenced your awareness of others?
8. How has this study abroad institute impacted your knowledge of Irish culture?
9. How has this study abroad institute impacted your ability to work with individuals from the Irish culture?
10. How has this study abroad institute influenced your ability to work with individuals from a culture other than your own?