

## A social distance study of American participants in a China study abroad program

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**Abstract:** As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, mutual understanding becomes increasingly important. Therefore, it is essential that people strive for reductions in social distance on an international level. Study abroad is one of the ways to approach internationalization and promote understanding among different peoples and cultures. The research reported in this paper empirically explored the efficacy of a China study abroad program for reducing the degree of social distance between a group of American undergraduate students and the Chinese people in China.

**Key words:** changes; social distance; Americans; Chinese; China study abroad

### 1. Introduction

Study abroad is one of the ways to approach internationalization and simultaneously promote understanding among different peoples and cultures. Higher education shoulders much of the responsibility for producing high quality students with positive international mindsets. According to Allan E. Goodman (2005), president of the Institute of International Education, "Many U.S. campuses are recognizing that increasing global competence among the next generation is a national priority and an academic responsibility".

International education has become one of the core educational missions in many American colleges and universities. Study abroad programs are increasing on the campuses of colleges and universities throughout the United States. According to the Institute of International Education, because of a growing recognition of the importance of international experience, American students are traveling and studying abroad in record numbers. The total number of American students studying abroad reached a record number of 582,984, according to *Open Doors* (Institute of International Education, 2007), the annual report on international education published by the Institute of International Education. The report states that 67,723 American students studied abroad in China in the academic year 2006/2007. This made China the second leading host destination for American students. Why has China become a popular place for American students to study abroad?

First, China is one of the four earliest civilizations in the world. According to myths and legends, the dawn of Chinese civilization began in 6000 BC. Secondly, China also has a long history of learning and is a good place for people to learn. Third, China has become one of the emerging economic powers in today's world. Knowles (2001) has written, "No place has changed quite like China. My China is not merely a country of changing. It is a country of great beauty. The China I love is a conundrum. It is breathtaking not merely for its antiquity, or for its beauty but despite its years of calamity, for its self-confidence".

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Today, some people in the United States are highly suspicious of the communists in China and believe their goal is to establish worldwide hegemony eventually. For its part, there are lingering suspicions in the People's Republic of China that everything the United States says and does is intended in one way or another to weaken and divide China. "American attitudes toward China continue to this due to oscillate between these two poles of fascination and sympathy, on the one hand, and fear and repugnance, on the other hand" (MacMillan, M., 2007, p. xviii).

The study was to ascertain if and how study abroad experiences promote understanding among people and bring them closer through a compressed, short-term, and intentional program of cultural immersion. The following research questions guided this study of American undergraduate students in China study abroad program at an American university.

## **2. Research questions**

(1) What is the social distance between American students and the Chinese people prior to the participation of the American students in China study abroad program?

(2) What is the social distance between American students and the Chinese people subsequent to the participation of the American students in the China study abroad program?

(3) How did the changes in social distance toward the Chinese people occur and what were the participants' impressions of the China study abroad experience?

(4) What did the study abroad participants consider the best and worst experiences of the program?

(5) How did the study abroad participants evaluate the overall China study abroad experience?

## **3. Research on social distance and attitude changes**

### **3.1 Social distance between nations**

Higher education has a profound impact on society and the development of its citizens. As societies become more diverse, the world in which we live becomes increasingly smaller. As the nations of the world become increasingly interdependent, mutual understanding becomes increasingly vital. Therefore, it is essential that people strive for reductions in social distance on an international level. To reduce social distance requires a deeper understanding of people from diverse cultures, open minds, and effective communication skills. The less social distance there is between people, the better people will presumably understand each other and, hopefully, the more peaceful the world will be.

Some studies (Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005; Kleg & Yamamoto 1995; Bogardus, 1967) have been done on the degrees of social distance between people from different cultures; however, little research has been done regarding the changes that cultural immersion affects among those who reside in different cultures for a specified time. Studies of study abroad programs have focused on cultural sensitivity and adaptability, yet few have combined the study abroad experience with the perceptions of self and another cultural group. This study presents a framework for understanding people through intercultural activities. Social distance and changes brought about in social distance are examined.

### **3.2 Social distance, attitude formation and attitude change**

In the study abroad literature, little has been reported regarding social distance, attitudes and attitude change. According to Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey (1962), "as individuals develop, their cognitions, feelings, and

action tendencies pertaining to various objects in their world become organized into enduring systems called attitudes". Changes in attitudes are rational. Attitude change is brought about through exposure to additional information, changes in the group affiliations of the individual, enforced modification of behavior toward the object, and through procedures which change personality. Participants in study abroad programs are intentionally exposed to different cultures and new information. The group they are associated with, and the people with whom they interact abroad, will stimulate attitude change, either congruent or incongruent.

Hensley and Sell (1979) conducted a study to assess attitude change among a sample of study abroad students. Their experimental group included 52 students who participated in a study abroad program in Geneva, Switzerland for a semester. The control group consisted of 17 students who stayed home. There were four dependent variables in the study: (1) world-mindedness; (2) support for the United Nations; (3) self-esteem; and (4) tolerance for ambiguity. The researchers discovered that the self-esteem of the study abroad participants was higher than the control group. The world-mindedness, support for the United Nations and tolerance of ambiguity of the experimental group, was not statistically different from the control group. The authors concluded that "the extent of contact with non-Americans is a more important factor in attitude change, although the impact is on psychological and non political attitudes".

Social distance refers to gradations and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize pre-social and social relations (Park, 1924). Bogardus (1967) conducted a series of studies on social distance. He conducted his experiments to ascertain how and why degrees of understanding and intimacy vary among different racial groups.

As Owen, Eisner and Mcfaul stated (1977, p. 82), "Bogardus measure of social distance has been the launching point for myriad studies of social class, occupation, religion, sex, age and race in many different cultures here and abroad". Parrilo and Donoghue (2005) also described, "In varying applications, the Bogardus social distance scale remains influential and extensively applied, vivid testimony from the academic community as to its merits".

#### **4. Methodology**

The study reported in this paper investigated the effects of studying abroad on the attitudes and social distance of American undergraduate students toward the Chinese people. First, the Bogardus social distance scale was used to measure and quantify student attitudes toward the Chinese people at two points in time. Before departure to China, respondents completed the scale as a pre-test of their social distance. Before the respondents returned to the United States, they completed the Bogardus scale as a post-test of their social distance. After the China study abroad program participants were back at their home country, intensive interviews were conducted to capture their experience and to evaluate and access their attitudes toward the Chinese people.

##### **4.1 An abbreviated description of the study abroad experience**

The treatment, or intervention, was a 3-week cultural immersion experience to which the students were exposed after their arrival in China. Studying in Hong Kong and vicinity, a major sourcing and marketing hub for apparel and other industries, gave the students opportunities for interaction with local business leaders and firms competing in the global marketplace. The program extended to Shanghai and provided students with hands-on opportunities to examine the ways in which cultural norms and standards impact contemporary marketing tactics and strategies. Scheduled tours included Hong Kong and Chinese manufacturing plants. Cultural tours and

experiential learning activities were scheduled as part of the study abroad living and learning experiences. Featured speakers included the director of the Hong Kong-America Center, an organization involving the promotion of understanding between Chinese and American cultures through educational and cultural exchanges.

#### **4.2 Instrumentation**

This study utilized the well-known and well-established Bogardus social distance scale (Emory S. Bogardus, 1967). It is a scale created by Emory S. Bogardus to empirically measure people's willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups. The scale asks people the extent to which they would be accepting of each group (a score of 1.00 for a group is taken to indicate minimal social distance; scores 2-7 indicate increasing social distance).

A demographic survey developed by the author was used along with the Bogardus social distance scale to obtain basic information about the participants before they departed for China. Finally, questions about the best and worse learning experiences of the students in the study abroad program were asked.

#### **4.3 Data analysis**

All statistical tests of significance were performed at the 0.05 alpha level. Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Tests were performed to ascertain the significance of observed pre-test to post-test changes in attitudes and social distance. A qualitative method was used to analyze the data which includes content analysis and data transcribed from interviews.

### **5. Findings**

Twenty-nine students constituted the original availability sample of undergraduate students who voluntarily participated in the study. 24 students were female; five were males, 83.3% were females; 16.7% were males. Regarding ethnicity, among the 29 participants who took the pre-survey, one was an African American, 1 was Asian, 19 were Caucasians, 6 were Hispanics, and 2 were self-reported "other". The majority of participants were seniors (n=17); the fewest were sophomores (n=3); nine were juniors. Their ages ranged from 20 to 27. Regarding the number of countries the participants had been to prior to the study abroad program, six had never been abroad. However, among those who had been abroad before the China trip, all had been to countries located in North America, South America and Europe. None had been to any Asian countries.

#### **5.1 Research question 1**

Research question 1: What was the pre-treatment social distance mean between the American students and the Chinese people *prior to* the participation of the American students in the China study abroad program?

The mean of social distance score between the American students and the Chinese people *prior to* the participation of the American students in the study abroad program was 1.53. The lowest level of social distance score was 1, which indicated the highest acceptance of the Chinese people on the Bogardus social distance scale: 12 of the pre-test takers' had a social distance score of 1; 6 pre-test takers had a social distance score of 2; 1 had a pre-test social distance score of 5.

#### **5.2 Research question 2**

Research question 2: What was the social distance between American students and the Chinese people *subsequent to* participation of the American students in the China study abroad program?

The social distance mean score between American students and the Chinese people subsequent to the participation of the American students in the China study abroad program was 1.21. 15 participants' social

distance score was 1; 4 participants' social distance score was 2. Nineteen participants voluntarily completed the Bogardus social distance scale after studying abroad. There was an observed, 32 mean score decrease on the post-test measure.

### **5.3 Research question 3**

Research question 3: How did the changes in social distance toward the Chinese people occur and what were their impressions of the China study abroad experience?

To answer this question, a qualitative analysis was employed. The subjective narrative descriptions of the students about what made the greatest impression on them depict their attitudes toward the Chinese people. Among the 19 post-study abroad comments about the China trip, 10 participants answered that the Chinese people impressed them most.

There were many written descriptions by the participants illustrate their impressions about the Chinese people gained through their participation in the China study abroad program. Most of them had positive feelings towards the Chinese and mentioned in different ways the helpfulness and friendliness of the Chinese people. None of the respondents came away with negative feelings about the Chinese people.

### **5.4 Research question 4**

Research question 4: What did the study abroad participants consider to be the best and worst experiences of the China study abroad experience?

Intensive interviews were conducted to explore the participants' experiences. The most frequently mentioned positive experience was the chances to talk to executives and business leaders in China and the positive exchange activities with local Chinese university students. The worst experience had something to do with language barriers.

### **5.5 Research question 5**

Research question 5: How do the students evaluate the overall China Study Abroad experience?

The overall ratings for this China studies experience were positive. 17 (89%) participants rated the program "excellent", 2 (11%) rated it "good".

## **6. Summary and discussion of findings**

What follows is a summary of the major findings of the research reported in this paper:

(1) The majority of the study abroad participants were Caucasian females. Regarding their educational backgrounds, academic seniors were the largest group in the study (56.7%); 33% were juniors.

(2) A large percentage (62%) of participants in the study was from middle to upper level income families.

(3) The majority of students in the study had previously traveled internationally. Twenty percent of the students had no international experience of any kind. For those students who had been abroad, their destinations had been South America, North America, Europe, and Mexico. No students in the program had been to China before the China study abroad program.

(4) The students in the study did not speak Chinese. Additionally, prior to the study, the students had had little or no contact with Chinese people.

(5) The mean pre-treatment score for social distance was 1.53 and the post-treatment mean for social distance score toward the Chinese people was 1.21.

(6) The observed decrease of 0.32 in social distance was not statistically significant at alpha 0.05 level.

However, the reduction in the valence of the social distance between the time prior to entering the study abroad immersion experience and the time after exiting the study abroad cultural experience was in the direction one would expect. Finally, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that a longer study abroad experience might have reduced the post social distance treatment mean score of the American study abroad students to an absolute one (the lowest score on the Bogardus social distance scale; lower scores indicate a higher acceptance of ethnic treatment groups).

## 7. Conclusions

Because the sample in this study was skewed beyond even approximate normality, the following conclusions must be viewed as tentative, at best:

(1) Social distance between study abroad students and the indigenous members of their host countries can be ascertained using the Bogardus social distance scale.

(2) It can be useful to quantitatively assess the amount of learning and social distance that takes place among participants in study abroad programs.

(3) It is equally crucial to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the effects of cultural immersion programs on the attitudes of study abroad students; in our research we accomplished this by asking participants to share with us what they considered to be the best and the worst learning experiences they had.

(4) Study abroad programs can be effective modalities for bringing about positive attitudinal changes in students who participate in them.

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