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Integrating Study Abroad Research and Practice: Asian and Asian American Students in Focus

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Introduction

In this research-to-practice brief, a member of the *Frontiers* team, a practitioner in the field, and a researcher at the RAISE Center at Wake Forest University came together to explore the experiences and learning outcomes of Asian and Asian American students in study abroad. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), individuals who identify as Asian are those “having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.” In 1968, Emma Gee and Yuji Ichiok coined the term *Asian American* to refer to all people identifying as such (Kambhampaty, 2020).

It is important to note that the research used to inform this brief is limited to that accessible through the Academic Research on Education Abroad

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(AREA) Database through the RAISE Center (see Brunsting et al., 2023, in this issue for more information). Also, the research and the brief focus specifically on experiences during study abroad and on the outcomes described in the limited studies explored.

Background

Asian and Asian American students comprise 7.5% of all participants in U.S. study abroad, compared to 9% Hispanic, 4.7% African American or Black, and 71.2% White students (Bell et al., 2021). However, beyond one large-scale study of academic outcomes (Bell et al., 2021), only three studies—all with fewer than four participants—have investigated the study abroad experiences and learning outcomes of this population (Du, 2018; Fernández, 2021; Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021). This brief begins to respond to this knowledge gap by drawing on in-depth accounts of Asian and Asian American students undertaking study abroad, with the goal of highlighting the academic, language, and identity development experiences and learning outcomes of their participation. Overall, study abroad contributes significantly to Asian and Asian American students' success; it increases their likelihood of timely graduation and of achieving higher GPAs (Bell et al., 2021), and it advances their language proficiency, reflection skills, and personal and identity development (Du, 2018; Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021).

Summary of Findings on Students' Experiences and Learning Outcomes

For Asian and Asian American students, whether the study abroad destination is one of heritage significantly shapes their experiences. For Chinese American students in China, their physical look was associated with expectations of native-level language proficiency (Du, 2018). When this was not the case, the students were met with surprise at and rejection of their claimed identities as well as disinterest in interacting with them (Du, 2018). The students varied in their responses to these reactions, with one displaying indifference and another reporting distress (Du, 2018). In contrast, such prejudice based on physical look and lack of local language proficiency was reported in neither of the two other reviewed case studies, one of a Chinese student in Italy (Fernández, 2021) and the other of a Vietnamese American student in Guatemala (Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021).

Second, prior exposure to diversity, whether at home or abroad, seems to influence Asian American students' study abroad experiences. The cases of two Chinese American students in China and a Cambodian American student in France reveal that significant prior cross-cultural encounters, including through earlier travel to the country of study, potentially contribute to students' positive study abroad experiences (Du, 2018). Growing up with immigrant parents in urban Texas, a Vietnamese American student found in her study abroad in Guatemala an opportunity to advance her trans-cultural and -lingual practice, making sense of and describing new encounters through consulting a range of her prior cultural practices and observations (Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021).

Third, Asian and Asian American students engaged in rich self-reflections during their study abroad. While in China, one Chinese American student discovered a mismatch between her ideal and perceived subject positions, following which she reflected on her appreciation of her American identity as membership in a multiracial and multiethnic society with relatively better reactions to minorities (Du, 2018, p. 130). Another realized a new level of her Chinese language proficiency after safely and successfully managing a traffic accident situation (Du, 2018, p. 131-132). The Vietnamese American student case also shows how reflections on identity increased the student's understanding and appreciation of her racialized background (Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021). Also, they reflected on their proactive pursuits of language practice opportunities, which increased their positive outlook on their performance as language learners and users (Du, 2018; Fernández, 2021; Quan & Menard–Warwick, 2021).

Translating Research into Practice

When analyzing available research findings, it is first and foremost important to acknowledge the extreme scarcity of research on Asian and Asian American students. However, there are a few recommendations that can be made for practitioners to keep in mind when supporting students that identify as Asian or Asian American.

Understand the Terms Asian and Asian American

Before all else, we, as practitioners, need to understand that the terms Asian and Asian American do not refer to one group of people, as is shown in the various studies cited above. We can use the U.S. Census Bureau or other reputable sources to determine how we define these terms, but we must

acknowledge that this is an extremely diverse population of people that come from many different countries with unique languages, cultures, and histories that impact their experiences both in the U.S. and abroad. The treatment of Asian and Asian Americans as a singular group with shared experiences also plays into the “model minority” myth, which has its own problematic history. This myth has been explored in other research and should be understood as a backdrop to understanding perceptions around this population (Chang, 2017).

It is clear that we cannot treat our Asian and Asian American students as a monolith. But should every education abroad professional be expected to understand the nuances of the origins of every student that identifies as Asian or Asian American? No, as this is unrealistic. What we can do is understand the space in which we work. We should look at the demographics of the institution we work at and the students we are likely to interact with. We should understand the particular population of our institution and its needs. What is their history? What barriers do they typically face? What is the history of students with that particular background in the countries in which we have programming? How can we better prepare that particular group of students? If we come across a student with whose background we may not be as familiar, we should do the research. It is our job to educate ourselves and not make assumptions based on preconceived notions or biases we may have.

Learn the Immigration History

We now take what we discussed in the previous section a step further by understanding that beyond an Asian and Asian American student’s ethnic or racial background, we contend that their or their family’s immigration history is going to be a factor. Is this student an international student? Is this student first- (or second-)generation, or has their family been here in the U.S. for multiple generations? What does this mean for how they identify? Just because we perceive someone as being Vietnamese does not mean that they have any actual ties to that culture or part of their identity. Or, perhaps they have very close ties and have learned to code-switch between their Vietnamese and American identities. This will impact how they approach study abroad and how they will experience perceptions of their identity, both in the U.S. and abroad. As is referenced in the summary of findings above, how much distress a student faces at how their identity is perceived is likely tied to their own ideas of their identity and expectations of the host culture, which makes it important for us to understand what these ideas and expectations may be.

Prepare Students and Staff for What Is to Come

Once we have an idea of the student population we are working with, we should have (the difficult) conversations about how their identity may be perceived abroad. A student may think they are not going to have any issues of discrimination in what they may see as their “home” country, but student testimonials and the research shows that this is not necessarily the case. The way a student speaks, looks, and/or is compared with other program participants may well influence how they will be perceived or treated. The type of prejudice an Indian American student faces in India will be different from what they experience in Germany. The experience of being treated differently from their peers or being outwardly discriminated against will trigger a variety of feelings, and students need to be prepared for what this could look like through reflection and dialogue sessions during the pre-departure phase.

Also, faculty preparation is just as important as student preparation. We should ensure that the faculty and program staff in-country and at the home institution are trained on how to deal with situations of discrimination that may arise. What do we do if a student comes to us and has experienced blatant racism in a country? Do we say “Oh, that’s just how it is here,” and brush it off? No. Does having the conversation make us uncomfortable? Perhaps. Do we have the skills to address the situation? Hopefully, yes, and if no, then advocating for training opportunities and resources is going to be key to supporting not only our students but also ourselves and our staff. We should begin creating a culture where these conversations are normal and ok.

Research Gaps

The suggestions presented above are only a few areas on which practitioners can begin to focus when looking at ways to support Asian and Asian American students. What is needed is more research focusing on this particular population: What barriers to studying abroad are unique to Asian and Asian American students? How can we best support this population prior to departure and while on program? How do we look at the intersectionality of their identities and how this impacts their study abroad choices and experiences? These are just some of the numerous questions that need to be explored.

Conclusion

Research has repeatedly shown that there are positive outcomes for students that study abroad regardless of their background. A majority of extant studies, however, is focused on White students, and literature that does focus on underrepresented students tends to group them together, making it difficult to disaggregate the data and hone in on specific groups such as Asian and Asian American students. In this brief, we have discussed the importance of understanding how we define such terms and how a student's ethnic/racial background, immigration history, and understanding of their identity will impact how they interpret experiences abroad, whether in countries that they may feel are their “home” or in those that are not. While generalizations can be made about barriers, about what support students need, and about how to recruit more students, etc., more research is needed to better understand and enhance the experiences and learning outcomes of Asian and Asian American study abroad students.

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