

# Intercultural Learning Assessment: The Link between Program Duration and the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

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## Introduction

At a time when global markets, communication technologies, and transportation systems have vastly increased multicultural contact in our daily lives, it is essential that “we develop communication skills and abilities that are appropriate to a multicultural society and to life in a global village” (Samovar & Porter, 2000). Institutions of higher education are striving to address these needs on one level by offering a broad array of study abroad programs that will encourage different types of students to study abroad. Engle and Engle (2003) have identified seven key components of study abroad programs that define their variety: program duration, entry language competence of participants, extent to which target language is used in coursework on site, context of academic work, type of housing arrangements, provisions for guided cultural/experiential learning, and structured opportunities for students to reflect on their cultural experiences. Given the growing emphasis on internationalizing higher education and the rapidly increasing number of students embarking on study abroad programs each year, research on student learning outcomes, especially those related to cultural learning, is assuming greater value and relevance. The study presented here aims to enhance our understanding of intercultural learning by focusing on the link between the development of intercultural sensitivity and the first of Engle and Engle’s key study abroad components, program duration.

It has long been argued that program duration is instrumental in achieving desired intercultural learning outcomes. Gudykunst (1979) concludes that “contact of only a short duration does not allow enough time to establish attitudes to change. The short duration of the contact results in an incomplete psychological experience for the participants” (p. 4). Similarly, Bennett (1993) suggests that it takes at least two years in the target country to develop basic levels of adaptive behavior and to acquire a new worldview (p. 55). For Leong and Ward (2000), the longer individuals stay in the

target culture, the more opportunities they have “to deal with the demands of a new environment” (p.767). The current study builds on this previous work in arguing that program duration is a significant variable in students’ abilities to integrate culturally while abroad and that it may be an important predictor of one specific element of intercultural learning, the development of intercultural sensitivity.

According to Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), this element involves “sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures” (p. 414). Bennett (1993) defines intercultural sensitivity as “the construction of reality as increasingly capable of accommodating cultural difference that constitutes development” (p. 24). Bennett’s definition is worth explicating: intercultural sensitivity involves a “construction of reality” inasmuch as individuals attach meaning to the world’s phenomena; it is “increasingly capable” because it is a developmental process that presupposes direction; it is “capable of accommodating cultural difference” in positing that individuals are able to integrate cultural difference into their worldview; and, finally, it “constitutes development” by virtue of being a process whose advancement is assumed to be desired. Intercultural sensitivity represents and comes about through a process of individual understanding, constructing, and experiencing of difference. Bennett suggests that the development of intercultural sensitivity occurs as the constructs and experiences of cultural differences evolve toward an increased awareness and acceptance of those differences.

It is important to distinguish between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. While they are not interchangeable terms, they can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Intercultural competence refers to the external behaviors that individuals manifest when operating in a foreign cultural context, where intercultural sensitivity refers to the developmental process that dictates the degree of an individual’s psychological ability to deal with cultural differences. An individual’s intercultural sensitivity is, then, the worldview that establishes the way that he or she experiences or processes cultural differences. According to Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003), intercultural sensitivity refers to “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences,” while intercultural competence refers to “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” (p. 422). Through increasing levels of intercultural sensitivity, increasing degrees of proficiency in intercultural competence become possible. At some point in an individual’s development, his or intercultural competence ceases to be a list of do’s and don’ts, and becomes instead an internal, almost “natural,” response to the cultural context. As Bennett, Bennett, Gaskins, and Roberts (2001) put it, “it is important for adapted behavior [intercultural competence] to emerge because it ‘feels right,’ not because ‘that is how one is supposed to act’” (p. 22).

The research project described here has been guided by three theories or models: The Intergroup Contact Theory, The Model of the Transformation Process, and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS, which will be discussed at length later in this paper, has been especially important in providing the framework within which changes in the development of students' intercultural sensitivity have been documented. These three theories and models provide intellectual contexts that allow U.S. to interpret what students who study abroad experience when exposed to a culture not their own.

The Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1979) argues against the common belief that mere contact between people from different cultures will naturally lead to harmonious relations between them. Research based in this theory has sought to identify conditions which, when present, allow prejudices and cultural conflict among individuals or groups to be reduced. The theory suggests that the context in which study abroad programs are embedded—the way that programs are structured, in terms of duration, language of instruction and the other key elements Engle and Engle have identified—will impact the development of students' intercultural sensitivity and their understanding of the target culture. The Model of the Transformation Process (Kauffman, Martin, & Weaver, 1992) explains and links three areas of human development—cognitive, culture-related, and psychological. For purposes of this study, the model shows the development that individuals may undergo through a study abroad experience, from an unconscious and narrow identification with and exclusive reliance on the values of their own culture, to the conscious inclusion and negotiation of their personal values with the values of other cultures. Finally, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) seeks to explain the process of and readiness for accepting cultural differences. This model provides clear stages of development from which “categories for the organization of student responses” (Gaskins, 1997, p. 56) can be drawn, and it provides a map for understanding the processes of developing intercultural sensitivity and the challenges involved in implementing these.

The concepts of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism are central to the DMIS. Bennett (1993) defines ethnocentrism as the assumption “that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality” (p. 30), and ethnorelativism as the understanding that cultures are relative to one another within a cultural context (p. 46). The model describes six progressive, developmental stages, each of which falls into one of those two main categories. Individuals who are “ethnocentric” will experience the world, will construct their reality, with their own culture as their frame of reference. Individuals who are “ethnorelative” experience their own culture as only a part of a universe of multiple cultures. Bennett (1993) identifies three ethnocentric stages—Denial, Defense, and Minimization—and three ethnorelative stages—Acceptance, Adaptation,

and Integration. In turn, each of the stages has sub-stages that further differentiate the subtleties of each.<sup>1</sup>

Bennett et al. (2001) indicate that “each stage [of the DMIS] is indicative of a particular *worldview configuration*, and certain kinds of attitudes and behavior are typically associated with each such configuration” (p. 13). Individuals in Denial, for example, negate cultural differences by experiencing their own culture as the only frame of reference for their reality. Individuals in Defence do what they can to avoid, and to withdraw from, cultural differences. They experience these differences in a polarized way, feeling either that their own culture is superior to others or that other cultures are better than their own. Individuals in Minimization emphasize similarities between individuals from different cultures at the expense of the differences. Despite the fact that these individuals recognize cultural differences, “deep down those cultures are seen as essentially similar to one’s own” (Hammer & Bennett, 2001, p. 12). Individuals in Acceptance recognize the complexity of other cultures and accept them as “different constructions of reality” (p. 12). These individuals see other cultures as equal to their own. Individuals in Adaptation are able to take on, at a conscious level, behaviors and perspectives different from their own, move in and out of them, and act according to rules dictated by them. Individuals in Integration also move in and out of different cultural contexts, but, contrary to those at the Adaptation stage, doing so becomes second nature to them. These individuals develop a multicultural identity and commonly feel that they do not belong to any particular cultural group. The model can be conceived of as a continuum, with Denial having the lowest and Integration having the highest level of intercultural sensitivity.

The study under discussion was designed to measure and describe changes in the intercultural sensitivity of University of Maryland students who would be studying abroad in two different language-based programs of differing lengths: a seven-week summer program in Taxco, Mexico, and a 16-week semester program in Mexico City. I was the faculty director for both, which were hosted, respectively, by the *Centro de Enseñanza para Extranjeros* (CEPE, [School for the Instruction of Foreign Students]), and the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM, [National Autonomous University of Mexico]).<sup>2</sup> The study’s primary research hypothesis was that changes in program duration would influence participants’ development of intercultural sensitivity. In exploring this hypothesis, I examined how students reflected on themselves both as cultural beings in their own right, and as cultural beings in relation to a different culture. In the first instance, I sought to document student perceptions about culture and cultural differences, their definitions and opinions about these, and their awareness about being members of their own culture. In the second, I sought to document the nature of student perceptions about Mexican

culture and Mexicans. The report presented here is part of a larger study that formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation.

## **M e t h o d o l o g y**

The participants in the study consisted of 28 students (18 in the program in Taxco and 10 in Mexico City) enrolled at the University of Maryland. The study relied on case study methodology and used both qualitative and quantitative measures. Data-gathering techniques included face-to-face interviews with individual students, the administration of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a questionnaire, and a demographic questionnaire designed to collect information about students' previous intercultural experience. The IDI, the interviews, and the questionnaire were used to collect pre-departure and post-program data. Qualitative and quantitative measures were used in order to provide different perspectives on the student experience; this mixture of data gathering methods, which amounted to triangulating the data, were intended to enhance the study's validity.

In addition to these data-gathering techniques, students documented their experiences in a guided journal. The journal instrument was employed to further triangulate the data. The analysis of the journals is not complete, so a discussion of that instrument and the insights gained through it will not be included here. Finally, the inclusion of a control group was considered, potentially to have consisted of students studying at the University of Maryland's home campus, but not included. It was decided that an analysis of the experiences of a control group of students attending classes only in the U.S. would neither confirm nor deny the study's hypothesis, that students attending programs abroad of differing length develop different levels of intercultural sensitivity.

## **T h e I D I**

The IDI, a 50-item paper-and-pencil instrument created in 1997 by Mitch Hammer and Milton Bennett and revised in 2001, is designed to determine the relative intercultural sensitivity of individuals, as defined by the DMIS. Administered to student participants twice, once prior to and then immediately after a study abroad experience, the IDI can be used to measure changes over time in the development of intercultural sensitivity. The IDI provides results in numeric and descriptive form both for actual and for self-perceived scores.<sup>3</sup> In addition to providing an overall score, the IDI also yields scores for the different scales, clusters, and sub-stages of the DMIS. An individual's overall score is used to determine his or her stage of development (again, as defined by the DMIS). The IDI's validity and reliability has been well established.

## **The Interviews and Questionnaire**

The interviews and the written questionnaire were developed specifically for this project. The pre- and post-program interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit information about students' perceptions of, exposure to, and experiences with cultural differences in general and Mexican culture in particular. Most of the questions in the post-program interview were the same as the ones in the pre-departure interview. However, the post-program interview included additional questions designed to elicit information about the students' experiences abroad. The written questionnaire was used following the Taxco students' return, in place of the post-program interview. Its questions were the same as those in the post-program interview.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

Open coding and pattern-matching techniques were used to analyze the qualitative data. For the quantitative data, correlations, paired *t*-tests, and regression analyses were conducted in order to examine: (1) if there were correlations between variables (race/ethnicity, gender, age, previous travel abroad experience, family cultural background, and exposure to cultural differences), (2) if there was any change, in one direction or the other (that is, advancing toward a higher level of intercultural sensitivity or regressing to a lower level) in the pre- and post-program scores, and (3) whether intercultural sensitivity was associated with the variables identified above.

## **Return Rates**

All students participating in the Taxco and Mexico City programs participated in the pre-departure interviews and IDI, returning a 100% rate for those data collections methods. The return rates were exceptionally high also for the post-return IDI, questionnaire and interview, at 89% for the Taxco students and 90% for the Mexico City students.

## **Presentation and Discussion of the Data**

The research findings suggest that duration of the programs does indeed significantly impact the development of student intercultural sensitivity.<sup>4</sup> Both quantitative and qualitative data show more development of intercultural sensitivity in the students in the Mexico City program than those in the shorter Taxco program. Interestingly, in both groups, the qualitative data show higher levels of development than that indicated in the quantitative data.

### Quantitative: IDI Measure

Where the IDI data was concerned, the development of intercultural sensitivity was traced through an individual participant’s progressing from one DMIS stage before the program to a higher level at program’s end. The IDI data shows that while less than one third of the students (31%) in the seven-week Taxco program advanced to the next DMIS stage, fully two thirds of the students (67%) in the sixteen-week Mexico City program did. This difference is substantial and suggests that the longer the program, the more interculturally sensitive students are likely to become. Tables 1 and 2 show the pre-departure and post-program IDI scores for the Taxco and the Mexico City groups. Table 3 shows the scores for both groups as a whole.

**Table 1: Individual actual and perceived IDI scores pre-departure and post-program, Taxco**

Students	Taxco Program								Gain (+)/loss (-)	
	Actual				Perceived				Actual	Perceived
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post			
Tx 1	96.62	M	98.62	M	123.07	Ad	120.68	Ad	+	-
Tx 2	92.77	M	97.29	M	122.44	Ad	124.65	Ad	+	+
Tx 3	96.10	M	98.07	M	121.20	Ad	124.78	Ad	+	+
Tx 4	79.80	Def	77.36	Def	114.97	Ac	115.67	Ad	-	+
Tx 5	107.74	Ac	102.10	Ac	127.52	Ad	125.33	Ad	-	-
Tx 6	94.88	M	106	Ac	123.49	Ad	126.66	Ad	+	+
Tx 7	70.42	Def	76.55	Def	114.09	Ac	115.09	Ac/Ad	+	+
Tx 8	107.67	Ac	102.04	Ac	125.44	Ad	126.03	Ad	-	+
Tx 9	81.81	Def	85.28	M	117.16	Ad	118.84	Ad	+	+
Tx 10	70.74	Def	83.80	Def	116.53	Ad	119.77	Ad	+	+
Tx 11	106.65	Ac	102.71	Ac	127.27	Ad	125.53	Ad	-	-
Tx 12	85.77	M	82.77	Def	120.13	Ad	119.77	Ad	-	-
Tx 13	114.95	Ac	109.39	Ac	128.32	Ad	128.14	Ad	-	-/=
Tx 14	81.54	Def	85.52	M	118.31	Ad	119.91	Ad	+	+
Tx 15	104.76	Ac	96.90	M	126.55	Ad	122.03	Ad	-	-
Tx 16	83.58	Def	88.87	M	120.17	Ad	120.01	Ad	+	-/=
Tx 17	94.92	M	---	---	123.27	Ad	---	---		
Tx 18	102.16	Ac	---	---	123.26	Ad	---	---		

Key: Def=Defense, M=Minimization, Ac=Acceptance, Ad=Adaptation, I=Integration. The last two columns indicate if the score increased (+) or decreased (-) after the programs.

**Table 2: Individual actual and perceived IDI scores pre-departure and post-program, Mexico City**

Students	Mexico City Program								Gain (+)/loss (-)	
	Actual				Perceived				Actual	Perceived
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post			
Mx 1	94.62	M	106.22	Ac	115.76	Ad	126.22	Ad	+	+
Mx 2	116.34	Ad	---	---	127.92	Ad	---	---	---	---
Mx 3	109.61	Ac	115.92	Ad	128.98	Ad	132.29	I	+	+
Mx 4	97.85	M	100.33	Ac	122.87	Ad	123.08	Ad	+	+
Mx 5	104.17	Ac	92.54	M	124.97	Ad	121.55	Ad	-	-
Mx 6	107.12	Ac	99.47	M	126.50	Ad	124.38	Ad	-	-
Mx 7	91.65	M	100.78	Ac	124.84	Ad	127.15	Ad	+	+
Mx 8	95.23	M	108.83	Ac	119.88	Ad	128.61	Ad	+	+
Mx 9	95.71	M	108.03	Ac	122.56	Ad	125.65	Ad	+	+
Mx 10	120.37	Ad	111.77	Ac	130.85	I	125.76	Ad	-	-

**Table 3: Group actual and perceived IDI scores pre-departure and post-program**

Group	Actual				Perceived				Gain (+)/loss (-)	
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		Actual	Perceived
Taxco	92.94	M	93.39	M	121.84	Ad	122.05	Ad	+	+
Mexico	103.27	Ac	104.88	Ac	124.51	Ad	126.08	Ad	+	+

The difference between the actual and self-perceived scores in both groups is significant. Self-perceived intercultural sensitivity—that is, the score showing an individual student’s personal perceptions of his or her intercultural sensitivity—was always at least one stage higher than the actual score. There is nothing surprising about this. As Kauffmann et al. (1992) point out, it is common for different types of assessments to produce inconsistent results when measuring the same phenomena. They classify assessment tools into three categories and explain that self-report and interview-type questionnaires tend to reveal the most positive outcomes of the experience being studied, while standardized instruments show the least. They suggest that the discrepancy in the results stems from researchers’ lack of attention to variables such as maturity level of participants, depth of their contact with the host country, duration of stay, and location. Where the present study is concerned, I believe that the subjective nature of personal documents may account for the differences.<sup>5</sup> It is not unreasonable to conclude that students unconsciously revealed those aspects of their development of intercultural sensitivity that they believed were socially desirable, while at the same time avoiding aspects that might have exposed them, if only in their own minds, to some degree of social disapproval.

There were no statistically significant differences in actual or perceived intercultural sensitivity scores before or after the participants studied in Taxco or Mexico City, but regression analysis indicates that being a male was associated with increased actual and self-perceived intercultural sensitivity scores in the Taxco group. For the Mexico



City group, the variables of age (which were negatively correlated), previous travel abroad experience, and membership in an ethnic or racial minority in the U.S. were associated with students' actual intercultural sensitivity upon return. In addition, Mexico City participants' previous travel abroad experience was associated with increases in perceived intercultural sensitivity scores after the end of the program. No other variables that the study focused on were found to be associated with the development of students' intercultural sensitivity.

### **Qualitative: Interview and Questionnaire**

As previously noted, the qualitative data focused on students' perceptions, definitions, and opinions of culture and cultural differences; their awareness of belonging to a culture; and their perceptions of Mexican culture and its people. For the data analysis, the students' pre-departure and post-program responses to the interviews and questionnaire were compared. Analysis focused particularly on areas where responses to the same questions proved to be substantially different. Narrative responses of individual students were also compared with actual IDI scores to provide a fuller sense about their individual overall worldviews.

#### *Culture and cultural differences*

The two groups differed in the way that they defined culture and discussed cultural differences. Over time, the interview responses of Taxco participants remained abstract and relatively impersonal, while the Mexico City group responses became more concrete from pre- to post-testing, relying more on specific examples. Carole and Missy's definitions after seven weeks in the Taxco program are typical in this regard: "Cultural differences involved emphasizing different beliefs, morals, values, etc." and "Cultural differences are ideas, opinions, beliefs, and history that as a country, race, or group share because of a shared history."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Tina, after sixteen weeks in Mexico City, relies significantly on examples drawn from her own experiences abroad in her post-program interview:

It's the differences that occur based on the – oh, geez – I guess it's based on the – I can't define it without using the word culture. It's all based on the area you grew up. Everything you eat, everything you do is based on the environment that you're in. Okay, um, so you know they eat cactus. We don't eat nopal [cactus]. We don't eat that. And also the language itself. I realized that well, when you drop something or forget something, we say I forgot. [Mexicans] say it forgot itself. . . .

In the same vein, many Mexico City program participants, during their post-program interviews, used terms like "every day," "everything" and "anything," words

they rarely used during the pre-departure interviews, when speaking about cultural and cultural differences. Susan's definition of cultural differences illustrates the point:

I think it's really just what people are used to in a different culture. I think it's just the little things that you take for granted, that you accept as part of your *everyday* life, that *everybody* does that it's so obvious that those little things that change when you go to another culture. I think that's the real cultural differences. It's the part of *everyday* life that changes from society to society. [Emphasis added]

Such language suggests that the Mexico City participants became increasingly aware, over time, that culture permeates every aspect of life. Through the use of such terms, the students exhibited a newly-acquired sense of the all-encompassing nature of culture. The longer students stayed in the target culture, the deeper their understanding of culture and cultural differences became, to the point where it was reflected in the type of language they chose to speak about culture and cultural differences.

### *Cultural identity*

The data show significant differences between the two groups' perceptions of cultural identity. Interestingly, a majority of the Taxco participants (69%) showed evidence, through the interview and questionnaire, of a significant change in their perceptions of cultural identity before and after the program, while fewer than half of the students in the Mexico City program (44%) experienced much of a change. In other words, the participants in the shorter Taxco program experienced more change in their perceptions of cultural identity than the students in the longer Mexico City program. The explanation for this lies in the fact that a majority of the students in the Mexico City group had a relatively strongly-defined cultural identity before the program started, compared to the Taxco group, as expressed in terms of their relative positions along the DMIS continuum. Overall, the students in the Mexico City group had a higher level of intercultural sensitivity before departure, as measured by the IDI, than did their counterparts in the Taxco group. Only a third of the students in the Taxco program had developed or at least started to develop an ethnorelative worldview, while half of the students in the Mexico City group had reached that point already.<sup>7</sup>

It is also worth noting that student views toward the U.S. changed significantly while they were abroad, with those enrolling in the longer Mexico City program showing greater progress in this regard than the Taxco participants. Prior to departure, both groups expressed criticism of the United States and what it represents, commenting on such things as the country's "capitalism," "commercialism," "materialism" and "imperialism." However, after their return to the U.S., many students in the Taxco group expressed a

broad appreciation for their home country, while several students in the Mexico City group were more critical in their analyses, especially where U.S. foreign policy and the fast food industry were concerned. Melissa, a Taxco participant, revealed her admiration for the U.S. as she described her “newfound appreciation for the United States” and said that she was “more proud to be an American than I was before I studied abroad.” Monica, another Taxco student, said, “I see more of the positives now. . . . I am not as hard on the USA.” Students in the Mexico City group returned commenting in their post-return interviews about their discontent with the United States. Susan’s statement, more concrete than the statements from the Taxco group, illustrates the point:

I’m coming to see why not a lot of people like Bush. Yes. I’m seeing that a lot of the world isn’t crazy about Hiroshima. I didn’t know anything about our occupying Nicaragua until I took the course, the History of Politics and Social Conflicts course. We seem to do a lot of cruddy stuff and get away with it because the public doesn’t know about it, and generally we tend to think of ourselves as better than other countries, so we are allowed to keep other countries in debt and not renegotiate loans, and stuff like that. Um, everything we do going to help another country has something in it for us.

Justin, another Mexico City participant, also returned with more negative feelings about U.S. culture than the Taxco students:

It’s just that everything is pre-packaged here in the U.S. . . . I came back and I saw that now they sell in the grocery store frozen peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that you take out of the fridge and let them thaw for a few hours and then eat them. And I just think, how lazy is that? How terrible is that people can’t make a sandwich for themselves anymore!

It seems that the students in the shorter program became more nationalistic than the students in the longer program, who returned with a more negative attitude toward the United States.

#### *Mexican culture and its people*

While all of the students in both groups seem to have changed their perceptions and gained insights about Mexican culture and its people in one way or another, the responses of students in the longer Mexico City program showed a greater reliance on detail and demonstrated a greater depth of knowledge and understanding. Most students in the Taxco program focused on external and behavioral differences. They talked about people being “laid back,” about a lack of consumer conveniences, and about differences between Mexico and the U.S. where food and

shopping places were concerned. Mexico City students, in addition to discussing the sorts of external characteristics that most Taxco students did, also commented on their own cultural perceptions and worldviews, and compared Mexican and U.S. politics and value systems. When asked prior to her departure to describe the similarities and differences that she expected to find between Mexico and the United States, Susan, a Mexico City participant, did not know what to say and explained that all she had to say was based on stereotypes. She speculated that, since many Mexican's were presumably Catholics, they might welcome big families like hers and might have close family relationships. Mexico, she thought, might be less commercial and more "grounded" than the United States, with all its "hectic running around." In other words, Susan had no significant knowledge about Mexican culture prior to her departure. She returned to the U.S. with a wealth of information and insights about the culture that ranged from surface observations about traffic and traditional food, to attitudes and values. A simple list of the themes she discussed during her post-program interview provides a good sense about the range of her observations and offers a sharp contrast to the state of her knowledge prior to departure. In describing how many archaeological sites there were in Mexico, and how fascinated Mexicans seemed to be about their own history, she concluded that they were significantly oriented toward the past. In a single interview, she also commented, extensively and in depth, on public transportation, politics, people selling "stuff" on the streets, *mercados* (markets), *comida corrida* (fixed price menus), differences in expenses, bargaining, the culture of tourism, the drinking age, poverty, cultural identity, grocery stores, education, and physical expressions of affection on street corners.

These and other comments of Mexico City participants contrasted sharply with those of the Taxco students after their return. For the students in the Taxco program, with the excitement of arriving in a new place, settling in, and getting to know their surroundings, seven weeks went by quickly. By the time they had begun to adjust, they were preparing to return home. Their comments and descriptions convey the impression that for them, study abroad provided a pleasant vacation in beautiful and historic Taxco; they had relatively little time to examine and reflect upon cultural, socio-economic and political issues. The opportunities they had for significant intercultural development were cut short. By contrast, the Mexico City students, exposed to cultural differences for sixteen rather than seven weeks, had greater opportunities for developing intercultural sensitivity. It is worth noting, in this regard, that the IDI data again supports such a conclusion: a majority of the Taxco students (56%) remained in the same DMIS stage, while none of the Mexico City students did.

## Limitations of the Study

Research limitations included sample size, lack of a control group, one-time testing after re-entry, data-gathering techniques upon students' return, and social desirability in personal accounts. Although the sample size was more than adequate for qualitative research, it made generalizability claims for the quantitative data inappropriate, as the recommended standard number to run a *t*-test for a small group is 30 participants. As noted earlier, the research design did not include a control group. As the study progressed, it became apparent, however, that having a control with which to contrast the other two groups' development of intercultural sensitivity development would have provided valuable information that would have enhanced our understanding of the phenomena under study and made the findings more robust.

Student intercultural sensitivity was measured only twice, the first time immediately prior to departure and the second immediately following re-entry. Vande Berg recommends that students' development should be measured three times—at the beginning and end of the program, and several months after the students' return. He suggests that, immediately following their return, students may not have internalized the intercultural learning that had begun during their sojourns, and that this learning may continue to occur during the months following their return home (personal communication, September 7, 2003). Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow for a third, delayed administration of the IDI and other instruments.

For reasons related to the availability of the participants and the researcher, two different data-gathering techniques were used with each group upon students' return: a questionnaire was administered to the students in the Taxco program, while the students in the Mexico City program were interviewed individually. This use of two different data-gathering techniques somewhat weakens the study's conclusions. Personally interviewing the Mexico City students contributed to a better response rate with this group and probably contributed as well to the students giving me lengthier and richer accounts about their experiences than the Taxco students did through their written questionnaire.

## Implications for Future Research

The data collected in this study does provide support for a hypothesis that duration of study abroad programs plays a key role in the development of intercultural sensitivity of U.S. university students abroad. Unlike the students in Taxco, those in the longer Mexico City program returned home showing: 1) significant development of intercultural sensitivity as defined by the IDI, (2) broader vocabulary and examples with which to talk about cultural differences, (3) a deeper understanding of Mexican culture and its people, and (4) a critical—and informed—point of view regarding the United States, its culture, and its international politics. These results suggest that the

longer students stay immersed in a target culture, the more they learn and grow, and the more their intercultural sensitivity develops.

Program duration is not of course the only variable that has an impact on intercultural learning outcomes. Other variables that influence learning in this area, most of which have been discussed to varying degrees in the study abroad literature include housing arrangements, the presence (or absence) of an on-site faculty director, target language proficiency, the quality and quantity of contact with host nationals, and the role of pre-departure orientation and journal writing. For purposes of future research, I believe it would be helpful to organize these variables into three categories:

- *Internal*: student backgrounds, characteristics, and personal circumstances (including student language proficiency prior to departure, student intercultural sensitivity level, previous experience abroad, previous exposure to cultural differences, and academic discipline)
- *External-Program*: choices about the experience made by the study abroad office (including length and location of the program, content of study, pre-departure and on-site orientation programs, re-entry activities, the availability of an on-site study abroad faculty director, and internships and service learning opportunities)
- *External-Students*: choices made by the students (including housing arrangements, independent travel, and amount of contact with hosts and target-language friends).

Neither study abroad programs nor the students who enroll in them should be treated generically. As seen in Engle and Engle's (2003) classification of study abroad program components and in the additional variables offered above, programs vary greatly in their design and make possible a great variety of learning outcomes. The internal variables noted above profoundly influence the extent to which students choose to take advantage of those learning possibilities. Their language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity level and previous experience abroad at the beginning of a program will influence their choices about such things as length and location of the program, housing arrangements, and amount of contact with hosts and target-language friends.

## **Multiple Data - Collection Methods**

Future research on the development of intercultural sensitivity should also rely on multiple methods of collecting data. Basing an interpretation of the development of intercultural sensitivity solely on the overall and final score of the IDI would be

misleading. The overall scores fail by themselves to capture the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. While the comparison of overall IDI scores, both before and after, may appear to be linear, the comparison of the different scales, clusters, and sub-stage scores in fact reveals simultaneous movement in several directions: (1) withdrawal toward ethnocentric tendencies, (2) entrenchment, and (3) development toward ethnorelative stages. The detailed information that the IDI yields is relevant to understanding the more subtle movements of intercultural sensitivity. This movement is more like an undercurrent that can be perceived only by examining the sub-scores of each scale, cluster, and sub-stage. In addition, this multiple movement helps shed light on the sorts of apparently contradictory statements that students in the present study sometimes made: such statements manifest various degrees of intercultural sensitivity. Thus, studies using the IDI should take into account the subtler evidence that the instrument provides. They should also supplement the IDI through triangulating its results with the collection of qualitative data of the sort that the present study has used: questionnaires, interviews, journals, and so on. The data from these multiple sources provides a more complete understanding of thought processes and changes in perceptions about a student's own culture and target culture, even when students stay in the same DMIS stage.

## **The Impact of Other Variables on Intercultural Learning Abroad**

### *Language proficiency*

Student responses in this study suggest that language proficiency may play an important role in intercultural learning; language proficiency prior to departure is clearly implicated in the choices that students make about the program they enroll in, and the extra-curricular activities they pursue while abroad. Hokanson (2000) found that the more fluent and literate students are in the language, the greater their development will be in the areas of culture and sociolinguistics, and the more interculturally sensitive they will become. Gudykunst (as cited in Hullett and Witte, 2001) explains this by noting that lack of language proficiency may result in avoidance of contact with the host culture, an avoidance that, in turn, will affect learning about the culture and developing meaningful connections with host-country nationals. This may result in minimal or no adaptation to the host culture, a consequent lack of intercultural sensitivity development and, worst of all, reinforcement of previously held stereotypes about the host culture. Studies like Vande Berg's (2001), which investigate the impact of language proficiency on the development of intercultural sensitivity, will shed light on this presumably important connection.

*Students' self-perceived and actual intercultural sensitivity*

The disparity between students' self-perceived and actual intercultural sensitivity levels also needs to be addressed in further research. In the present study, all students perceived themselves as having attained higher levels of sensitivity than they in fact had. It is important to understand in what ways an unrealistic self-perception about one's level of intercultural sensitivity may affect learning abroad.

*Race and ethnicity*

Research is needed about the extent to which race and ethnicity affect student learning outcomes; they do seem to have informed student learning in the present study. A heritage learner originally from Puerto Rico, for example, reported that she knew what to expect from her experience in Mexico because she was Hispanic. It is an open question about whether this belief prevented her from noticing certain cultural differences between Mexico and Puerto Rico, especially the more subtle ones. Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich (1995) speculate that U.S. students expect England to be similar to the United States, and when they find the culture and language to be different, they face significant difficulties adjusting to the culture.

A significant number of students involved in this study were confronted with issues relating to their race and ethnicity during their time abroad. Several European-American students reported that they felt like members of a privileged minority, and several African-American students felt exotic and objectified. In short, many, perhaps most, of the participating students learned—some perhaps for the first time—what it means to be the outsider, the “other.” It is important to understand how constructs of race and ethnicity, so important in the United States, affect students' experiences abroad.

*Power differentials between groups and among individuals*

Certain themes related to differentials of power emerged from the data and require further exploration. One such theme is that of social class. Several students were struck by the economic differences between themselves and their Mexican counterparts, and by the overt poverty they encountered in Mexico. Another theme worthy of exploration is national and ethnic stereotyping, which in part relates to the issue of class. For example, many students commented on Mexicans' perceptions about all Americans being rich. The majority of students, and especially those in the Taxco program, noticed that they were treated differently than locals: they were charged higher prices for hotels, jewelry, food, and other goods and services. Two students felt mistreated, denigrated, for being “gringos.” Students responded emotionally to these experiences in a variety of ways: they reported feeling angry,



frustrated, sad and guilty about this unequal treatment. Again, it seems very likely that such strong emotional reactions significantly impact student learning.

## **Implications**

The results of this study, when considered in relation to the theories and models that are its foundation, provide significant support for students' intercultural learning abroad. From the Intergroup Contact Theory, it is clear that there are conditions that optimize the learning outcomes of an experience abroad, namely the external and internal variables of any given program. As this study has shown, the variable of program duration has an important effect on intercultural learning outcomes. From the Model of the Transformation Process, it is apparent that these conditions, or variables, influence and affect each other. Students use and interpret the cognitive and culture-related knowledge that they may gain depending on their psychological development, such as maturity, adaptation skills, and the like. If, as study abroad coordinators and administrators, we focus on supporting the development of only one area, we will be missing an opportunity to help the students grow as whole and complex human beings. Finally, from the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), we learn that intercultural learning is a process and that students need to work at developing their intercultural sensitivity before, during and after a study abroad experience. The remaining part of this section suggests practical ways in which study abroad coordinators and administrators can aid students' intercultural learning.

It is likely that student learning would be maximized if students were to receive appropriate assistance in choosing the right program to meet their goals. Such guidance would help keep their expectations realistic and would better prepare them both for the experience abroad and for their return home. The implications for student advising and orientation seem particularly relevant.

Students in this study returned from Mexico speaking about its culture in absolute terms; both their pre-departure and post-program IDI scores also indicated that they had significantly inflated opinions about the levels of their own intercultural sensitivity. Both are worrisome and deserve attention. The students' eagerness to learn about a foreign culture and their efforts to achieve this goal are both commendable and worthwhile. However, the data strongly suggests that students need to be advised—prior to departure, during and after the program—that their experiences will allow them only to observe and experience some relatively thin slices of a much larger and more complex culture. They also need to be cautioned about rushing into incomplete and simplistic interpretations about the target culture. Arguably, all students, whether in the shorter or longer program, had just begun to see the proverbial tip of the cultural iceberg. It would appear, from the results of this study, that neither

a seven-week summer program nor a sixteen-week semester program is long enough to allow students to fathom the complexities of the target culture below the water line.

Students also should be advised about going abroad and returning—as many of the students in these two groups did—with inflated ideas about their own intercultural sensitivity in comparison with their compatriots at home. The danger of such misperceptions is two-fold. First, students may believe before departure that they are more ready for the experience than they in fact are, and as a result not take seriously the importance of preparing themselves in order to maximize their chances of meeting realistic learning objectives while abroad. Second, students may, upon return, misrepresent the insights and knowledge they gained while abroad as a comprehensive understanding of the foreign culture, rather than a slice of the culture within a very specific context. If students believe that their experience has taken them to higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, they may be discouraged from furthering their own development.

Study abroad advisors have the responsibility of knowing which variables will maximize the results of a study abroad experience and passing along that knowledge to the students. At a time when short-term study abroad programs are becoming the rule (Szekely & Krane, 1997), rather than the exception, students should be informed that program duration may impact their learning. Developing an accurate nomenclature for the different experiences seems a first step toward acknowledging differences in outcomes. The term “field trip abroad,” for instance, can be used for programs of no more than four- or five-week duration. Engle and Engle’s (2003) proposed comprehensive classification of study abroad programs accounts not only for differences in duration in classifying programs, but also considers other key variables, which in turn influence a particular program’s learning outcomes. A “field trip abroad,” as I am considering it, would correspond to the first level—the “study tour”—in the Engle and Engle’s classification.

The data in the present study also suggests that, where pre-program orientation is concerned, study abroad advisors would do well to help students make sense of the intercultural encounters, along with differences in cultural value orientations, socio-economics, and politics that they were about to come into contact with while abroad. Two salient points that are not commonly taken into consideration or discussed with students are the influence of race and ethnicity, and differentials of power between the students and their country and the people they encounter in the host country.

As learned from the DMIS scale, students also need help understanding that one experience abroad is not likely to make them experts about the host culture, and that their journey toward ethnorelativism may just be beginning when they return home. Study abroad offices should encourage students upon return to take further steps toward continuing their intercultural sensitivity development. For example, the use of guided journals as a required part of the programs is highly recommended. Although

not part of this discussion, journals appear to have played a supportive role in the students' intercultural development.

Developing intercultural sensitivity is not only a laudable endeavor but also a necessary one if we are to gain respect for, and knowledge and understanding of, another culture. It may allow the U.S. to live and work in peace with others—and studying abroad can help our students meet these goals. An experience abroad can expose students not only to cultural differences, but also to themselves. One student in the Mexico City program said it well:

I'm not entirely sure what my expectations [about the program] were, but I think they were surpassed. I didn't really think about the fact that I was going to be a minority... And that was really weird. And then it occurred to me that I was kind of an upper-class minority. I didn't know if there was any place in the world I could go where I could experience being a lower class minority, just because of my skin color. I thought that was really weird. ... There were just so many little things that changed my perception of daily life that I wasn't anticipating; [so many] things that I saw that really affected me.

Study abroad, when carefully planned and prepared for, can change students' lives. Continued research is needed to further our understanding of the conditions that maximize the development of intercultural sensitivity and its correlation with study abroad. Let us—study abroad coordinators, teachers, and scholars—do what is in our power to make that happen.

In the US, we have so many different and often conflicting cultural beliefs and lifestyles that we all must be willing to adjust in order for things to work. No one culture should have the right to make everyone else adapt. If we truly are a global *community*, then we need to act like a community and think communally. That means working out ways for people to live together successfully. If everyone is willing to give up a little it can work. However, if some people expect others to give up more than they do, there is not balance, and this doesn't work. That is the problem we have now in the U.S. and in the world. (U.S. female student upon her return from studying in Taxco, Mexico)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The sub-stages of each stage are: a) for Denial: Isolation and Separation; b) for Defense: Denigration, Superiority, and Reversal; c) for Minimization: Physical Universalism and Transcendent Universalism; d) for Acceptance: Respect for Behavioral Difference and Respect for Value Difference; e) for Adaptation: Empathy and Pluralism, and f) for Integration: Contextual Evaluation and Constructive Marginality.

<sup>2</sup> The program also varied in location, although the focus of the research was on length. However, the data analysis indicates that location is a variable that cannot be overlooked.

<sup>3</sup> The self-perceived scores represent the intercultural sensitivity level students believe they have; they may not (and do not, for this study) correspond to the actual scores.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this report, only development and not stagnation or withdrawal to previous stages will be discussed.

<sup>5</sup> Allport (1942) defines personal documents as “any self-revealing record that intentionally or unintentionally yields information regarding the structure, dynamics, and functioning of the author’s mental life” (p. xii).

<sup>6</sup> Students have been assigned fictitious names for the purposes of this article.

<sup>7</sup> The students’ initial DMIS stages as determined by the IDI were, for the Taxco group: Defense (6 students, 33%), Minimization (6 students, 33%), and Acceptance (6 students, 33%). For the Mexico City group: Minimization (5 students, 50%), Acceptance (3 students, 30%), and Adaptation (2 students, 20%).

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