Implications of Early Sociocultural Adaptation for Study Abroad Students

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Student adjustment to their study-abroad, host culture forms an important part of both the potential for developing intercultural competence and foundation for transformational examination of values and identity (Bennett, 2008). According to Ward, and colleagues (Ward, 2001; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999), student adaptation to a different culture can be seen as both psychological (coping with acculturative stress), and sociocultural (learning what it takes to "fit in" to the new culture). Ostensibly, these two types of adaptation support one another, with certain caveats (Berry, 2005). While psychological adjustment focuses on affective reactions to intercultural adjustment, sociocultural adaptation is based on learning the skills and knowledge necessary to reduce difficulties with the "foreignness" of a different culture (Ward, 2001). A person can be said to have adapted socioculturally when he or she knows how to behave according to the norms of the foreign culture in which they are living. The current longitudinal study examines the relationship between sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Specifically, it focuses on the impact of the ease of "fitting in" to a new culture with psychological outcomes of satisfaction and reactions to stress. One might predict that lower initial adaptation to living in a foreign culture might result in lower psychological adjustment. The study findings, however, are more complicated revealing linkages to the quality of the study abroad experience more than to its outcomes.

With the increase in globalization, fields such as international education as well as those of business and political science will be facing an increase in numbers of students and workers adapting to foreign cultures. In international education, study abroad placements are on an upward trend (Chin, & Bhandari, 2006) and are predicted to accelerate over the next decade (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005). Helping students and others facing the task of adapting to a foreign culture is becoming ever more pressing. The current study delves into sociocultural adaptation in order to clarify that process and provide information useful for educators, trainers, coaches, and others guiding those facing a sojourn in a foreign culture. A brief literature review will set the stage for the study.

Acculturative Stress

When students are dropped into a foreign culture to study and live for an extended period of time, they face a booming, buzzing, confusion of cultural clashes, as well as the excitement and challenge of engaging with a foreign world (Matsumoto, et al, 2001, 2004). From the classic stress and coping point of view (Lazarus, 1999), students' coping resources are taxed in dealing with such daily stressors as riding public transportation, standing in line, making purchases in local stores. The expectations the students carry from their home cultures do not necessarily apply in their host culture. From the sociocultural perspective (Ward, 2001) they are faced with the task of learning a new set of skills and, sometimes more difficult, altering well practiced skills at fitting in to a culture based on their previous experience. Depending on their personality and their coping skills, students may experience the new learning situations as exhilarating and challenging, or threatening and even harmful. These perceptions can have consequences in terms of psychological adjustment (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox, 1999).

Sociocultural Stressors

Not all stressful situations in a foreign culture are created equal. Savicki and colleagues (2008) found that some stressors were important to study abroad students throughout their sojourn (e.g. complying with the rules of social interaction); while others, on average, hardly registered to students as stressful at anytime during their stay (e.g. finding food to enjoy). In addition, the importance of various sociocultural stressors differed over the course of the sojourn. Early on, concerns about making one's self understood dominated; while later, issues emerged with regard to using the host culture language, and comparing the U.S. and host culture to other cultures encountered during travels. A total of 23 stress categories were identified.

On average, the difficulty in responding to sociocultural stressors tapers off over time. Ward and Kennedy (1999) found that the average difficulty that sojourners experienced in adapting to a list of 29 stressors dropped, reaching a somewhat steady level in about six to twelve months of interaction with the host culture. However, this course of change based on average scores may mask different trajectories of change for the various stressors found by Savicki, et al. (2008). The current study follows both average sociocultural adaptation and separate stressors over three time periods during a three month study abroad sojourn in order to examine this phenomenon more closely. The focus is not only on the relationships of sociocultural and psychological adaptation, but also on the precursors and mechanisms by which sociocultural adaptation might occur.

Contributors to Sociocultural Adaptation

Ward and Kennedy (1999) as well as Barry (2005) indicate that sociocultural adaptation may be the result of many intermingled factors. On the level of personality characteristics, for example, adjustment to a foreign culture for study abroad students has been related to personality characteristics of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, optimism, and hope (Mastumoto, et al., 2004; Savicki, et al., 2004). Matsumoto and colleagues (2001, 2003, 2004) correlated intercultural adjustment to characteristics such as emotional regulation, openness, flexibility, and critical thinking.

Previous experience such as language fluency, travel experience, and friends from other cultures may ease study abroad students' difficulties in adapting to a different culture through the breaking down of ethnocentrism (Bennett, 1993). Also, the intensity of the demands of the study abroad experience may pose barriers to intercultural adjustment. Variables such as cultural distance, cultural isolation, level of immersion, and experienced control over events may tax student efforts at fitting in with the host culture (Paige, 1993; Savicki, Cooley & Donnelly, 2008).

In addition, strategies used to appraise and cope with stress were related to sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 2001; Savicki, et al., 2008). The processes involved in sociocultural adaptation are many and complex. In the current study we look specifically at the impact of affectivity and stress appraisal strategies.

Variability of Adaptation

Not all study abroad sojourners achieve a comfortable, or even a tolerable level of adaptation with their host culture. The literature is rife with reports of failed placements (Adler, 1997; Matsumoto, et al., 2001). The most common presumption is that sociocultural adaptation is normally distributed with most sojourners achieving a modest level of adaptation; some maintaining a separation from the host culture; some assimilating completely (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). In a related discussion of acculturation, Berry (1997, 2004) describes strategies that sojourners may employ to adjust to their host culture. These strategies combine the individual's identification with their home culture with their identification with the host culture. The most beneficial strategy, from Barry's point of view, is the Integration strategy in which the sojourner identifies positively with both the home and host cultures at the same time.

A question to be examined is how to facilitate study abroad student sociocultural adaptation so that they can reap the benefits associated with the Integration strategy. Fundamental to answering that question is the need to discover what proc-

esses might be involved with successful versus unsuccessful sociocultural adaptation. The current study attempts to explore this matter by following students who report easy versus difficult sociocultural adaptation early in their sojourn.

Hypotheses

Following from the above discussion, we will explore several hypotheses related to sociocultural adjustment in study abroad students.

Hypothesis 1: Low and high initial sociocultural adaptation will be related to previous culturally related experience, personality characteristics, and measured potential for intercultural adjustment.

Hypothesis 2: Lower initial sociocultural adaptation will lead to lower sociocultural adaptation at the end of the sojourn.

Hypothesis 3: Salience of issues of sociocultural adaptation will vary overall, and different issues will be salient for low and high initial adapters.

Hypothesis 4: Lower initial sociocultural adaptation will lead to poorer psychological adjustment at the end of the sojourn.

Hypothesis 5: Lower initial sociocultural adaptation will lead to more difficulties in the process of adjusting to the host culture.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 59 U.S. university students studying abroad in four different countries (Austria = 16, Greece = 9, Italy = 11, Spain = 23). Average age was 21.5 years; 65% were women; 42% were seniors, 52% were juniors, 6% were sophomores. They sojourned in their respective countries for approximately three months during the Autumn.

Measures

Socio-cultural adaptation scale (SCAS). Ward and Kennedy (1999) have identified a list of encounters, and issues that may be relevant to sociocultural adjustment. Respondents rate their difficulty in adjusting to cultural situations using a five point Likert scale with 1 = No difficulty to 5 = Extreme difficulty. A brief sample of their 29 item scale includes "Making friends," "Using the transport system," "Going shopping," "Dealing with unsatisfactory service," "Getting used to the local food/finding food you enjoy," "Dealing with people in authority," "Understanding the locals' world view" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999 p. 663). Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .858. In addition, Ward and Kennedy (1999) factor analyzed their scale and found two factors:

Cultural Empathy and Relatedness (13 items), and Impersonal Endeavors and Perils (7 items). These factor scales are used in subsequent analyses.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The SWLS is a five item questionnaire using a seven point Likert scale to rate overall satisfaction with life using questions such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS can be viewed as a measure of psychological adjustment since the scale demonstrated moderately strong criterion validity with several measures of psychological well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985 pp. 72–73). Alpha for the current sample was .853.

Psychological symptoms. Psychological strain was measured based on four subscales from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The five to six item symptom cluster scales included were Somatization: distress arising from perceptions of bodily dysfunction; Depression: dysphoria and lack of motivation and energy; Anxiety: nervousness, panic attacks, apprehension, dread; and Hostility: thoughts, feelings or actions of anger. Coefficient alphas for the subscales were Somatization .780, Depression .827, Anxiety .746, Hostility .744.

Appraisal of stress. The Appraisal of Life Events (ALE) scale (Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox, 1999) assesses cognitive appraisal of stressful situations via three dimensions: Challenge (6 items), the degree to which the environment is perceived as one that allows for personal growth and development through potential mastery of stressors; Threat (6 items), the degree to which the environment is perceived as hostile, apt to generate anxiety, and may be potentially harmful; and Loss (4 items), the potential for suffering and sadness. Participants were asked to appraise "my study abroad experience" on 16 adjectives (e.g. stimulating, exciting, fearful, hostile, depressing, painful) using a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all, to 5 = Very much so. Alphas for the current sample were Challenge, .846; Threat, .884, and Loss, .796.

Affect. Positive and negative mood were assessed with the Positive and Negative Affectivity Schedule (PANAS); (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The Positive Activation subscale lists 10 adjectives related to positive mood (e.g. active, alert, attentive). The Negative Activation subscale lists 10 adjectives related to negative mood (e.g. afraid, ashamed, distressed). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they had felt each of these emotions over the past few weeks of their sojourn. Ratings were made on a five point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Very slightly or not at all to 5 = Extremely. Alphas for the current sample were Positive Activation, .832; Negative Activation, .858.

Intercultural Potential Scale (ICAPS). The ICAPS consists of 55 items with responses given on a scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. A total score (ICAPS Total) was computed by summing all items (24

reverse coded) with higher scores indicating greater adjustment potential (Matsumoto, et al., 2001). This scale has demonstrated predictive validity for adjustment to a new culture based on peer and expert interviewer ratings, as well as self and subjective ratings (Matsumoto, et al., 2001 p 492). Four factor scores were also derived—Emotion Regulation (ER): the ability to modulate one's emotional reactions to avoid employing psychological defenses, Openness (OP): the ability to engage in learning about the new culture, Flexibility (FL): being free of over-attachment to previous ways of thinking and willingness to tolerate ambiguity, and Critical Thinking (CT): the ability to generate creative, new hypotheses about incidents in the new culture that go beyond one's home cultural framework. All five ICAPS scores were transformed to T-scores with a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10 based on a normative sample. The authors of the scale reported alphas of .783 for the ICAPS Total, .638 for Emotional Regulation, .601 for Openness, .568 for Flexibility, .433 for Critical Thinking (Matsumoto, et al., 2001).

Personality. Personality was measured using a short version of the Big Five personality factor approach (Fossum, Weyant & Etter, Feldman-Barrett, 1996). For this 35 item scale, each sub-scale had 7 items. The scales and key defining traits for each include: 1) Neuroticism: anxious, hostile, self-conscious; 2) Extraversion: outgoing, sociable, upbeat, assertive; 3) Openness to experience: curiosity, flexibility, unconventional attitudes; 4) Agreeableness: sympathetic, trusting, cooperative, straightforward; 5) Conscientiousness: diligent, disciplined, well-organized, dependable. Alphas for the sub-scales in this sample are Neuroticism .768, Extraversion .773, Openness . 731, Agreeableness .611, Conscientiousness . 707.

Procedures

Students responded to measures voluntarily with assurance of confidentiality. Demographic information, the Big 5 personality scale and the ICAPS were completed prior to departure for the study abroad placement. The SWLS, BSI, ALE, and PANAS measures were all taken at the end of the student study abroad sojourn.

Sociocultural adaptation was assessed with regard to three points in time: first week of the sojourn, middle week of the sojourn, and end of the sojourn. Because it would have been difficult for students to understand the meaning of the SCAS questions during their first week in a foreign culture, both first week and middle of the sojourn measures were taken at the same time. Students were asked to recall their first week reactions to the SCAS items retrospectively, and respond to their middle of sojourn reactions concurrently. End of the sojourn reactions were assessed at the end of the sojourn. In addition, at the end of the

term, students were asked to estimate the frequency with which they encountered the sociocultural issues listed in the SCAS. Frequency was measured via a five point Lickert scale with 1 = Never, and 5 = Very Frequently.

In order to test hypotheses concerning the impact of early sociocultural adjustment on study abroad outcomes, the whole sample was divided via a median split on their SCAS scale scores for the first week of their sojourn into Low Initial Adapter (n = 26) and High Initial Adapter (n = 27) groups. In this case, as in all others unless otherwise noted, higher scores indicate better socio-cultural adjustment. There were no differences between the groups in age, gender, or class standing, nor were there any differences between the study abroad sites at which students were enrolled.

Results and Discussion

Prediction of low versus high initial adapters

In general the Low Initial Adapters were not different from the High Initial Adapters in either demographic or personality characteristics. No differences appeared in years of language studied in high school or college, number of weeks of previous foreign travel, number of friends from a foreign culture, or emphasis on ethnic identity in the family. Only a marginal difference appeared for previous foreign exchange ($p < .09$). Likewise, no differences appeared in personality characteristics of extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, or agreeableness; with only a marginal difference for neuroticism ($p < .07$). Additionally, no differences appeared between the groups on any of the intercultural adjustment potential scales. Hypothesis 1 is rejected. Predicting which students would fall into the Low or High Initial Adapter groups was not based on personality, potential for intercultural adjustment, or previous experience that might be related to sociocultural adaptation.

### Course of sociocultural adaptation

A repeated measures analysis of variance indicated that the High and Low Initial Adapter groups showed significant differences in sociocultural adjustment over the three time periods in which they were assessed ($F = 114.48, p < .001$). Table 1 indicates means and standard deviations and significance levels for the overall SCAS score and for the two factor scores for the groups. Additionally, there was a significant interaction between groups and time ($F = 143.58, p < .001$). Figure 1 shows the course of change in the SCAS Factor scores for the two groups over the three time periods. The High Initial Adapters held their higher relative position throughout the three time periods. However, the Low Initial

Table 1. Sociocultural Adaptation Total and Factor scores for High and Low Initial Adapter groups over three time periods

	Low Initial Adaptation		High Initial Adaptation		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
Total SCAS score					
First week	2.91	0.07	3.856	0.069	92.97***
Middle Week	4.127	0.063	4.462	0.062	14.366***
End of Term	3.945	0.081	4.164	0.079	3.761+
Cultural Empathy and Relatedness					
First week	2.702	0.079	3.676	0.076	78.12***
Middle Week	4.061	0.078	4.399	0.075	9.79**
End of Term	3.846	0.091	4.054	0.088	2.67
Impersonal Endeavors and Perils					
First week	3.126	0.112	4.097	0.108	39.24***
Middle Week	4.203	0.078	4.592	0.075	12.78***
End of Term	3.835	0.109	4.138	0.105	4.03*

$+ p < .10$, $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$

Figure 1. Course of SCAS Factor Scores over Three Time Periods
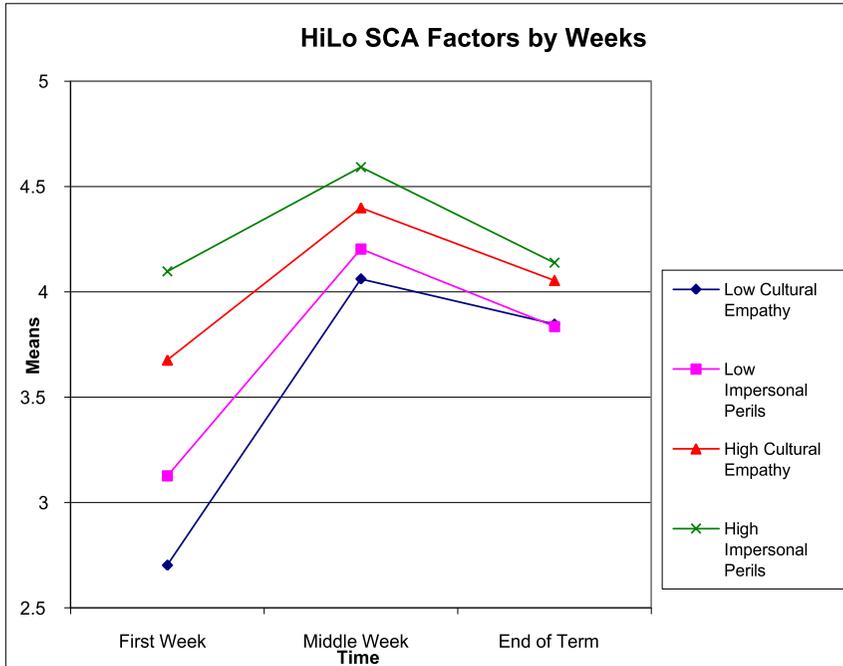
Adapters showed a steeper increase between the First Week and the Middle Week than did the High Initial Adapters. At the End of the Term the initial difference was all but erased with Low Initial Adapters maintaining their significantly lower level of sociocultural adaptation only for the Impersonal Endeavors and Perils factor ($p < .05$). Support for hypothesis 2 is mixed. Lower initial sociocultural adaptation was predictive of lower adaptation at the end of the sojourn only marginally for the total score, and significantly only for one of the two factor scores. The steepness of change between first week and middle week scores illustrates a robust reduction of difficulty in fitting in for the Low Initial Adapters.

  Several aspects of this course of sociocultural adaptation call for discussion. First, the data are not consistent with a smooth learning curve as suggested by Ward and colleagues (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward, 2001; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). A middle week peak was followed by an end of term fall off. It may be that early resolutions of sociocultural issues are revisited later in one's sojourn. Second, Low Initial Adapters seem to catch up with High Initial Adapters by the end of the sojourn especially with regard to Cultural Empathy and Relatedness. This type of adaptation may have been aided by a required intercultural communication class that all students took regardless of the study abroad

culture in which they were placed (cf. Arrúe, 2008; Binder, 2008; Minucci, 2008). Although the Low Initial Adapters improved significantly, the more mundane, day-to-day Impersonal Endeavors and Perils remained challenging. At the end of their sojourn they were still having significantly more difficulty than their High Initial Adapter comparators with "People staring," "Unsatisfactory service," and "Local food/finding food you enjoy." Likewise, High Initial Adapter's Impersonal Endeavors and Perils scores did not improve significantly. Such seemingly routine issues may continue to be of concern because they are based on unavoidable, specific, everyday encounters. Understanding a culture in the abstract may be easier than responding to it concretely.

Changes in specific sociocultural topics

The overall SCAS score as well as the two factor scores are based on averaging ratings over several sociocultural issues. An examination of those issues separately illustrates that students perceive that the issues occur with varying frequency. Table 2 shows that frequency of the events of the SCAS varied substantially. On the low end were "Worshipping in your usual way" at 2.06 and "Dealing with bureaucracy" at 2.11 or Seldom on the rating scale. On the high end were "Making yourself understood" at 4.15 and "Finding your way around" at 4.14, between Regularly and Quite Frequently on the rating scale. In general, those issues occurring more frequently showed significant differences between First Week and End of Term. These were the issues that students faced on an ongoing basis.

Figures 2 and 3 show a weighted average of SCAS issues for the beginning and ending time periods sorted by factors. The level of difficulty experienced on each issue was multiplied by the frequency of occurrence to give a weighted index of its impact on study abroad students. Some items were weighted as relatively easy to deal with across all time periods; e.g. "Dealing with the bureaucracy," and "Dealing with people in authority;" probably because in their role as temporary sojourners the students did not have to face these challenges often. On the other hand, some items were weighted as relatively difficult to deal with across the sojourn; e.g. "Making yourself understood," "Understanding jokes and humor." Such issues might be expected to linger until a sojourner had entered deeply into the culture. Of more interest to study abroad educators and others who would facilitate students' understanding and comfort with a new culture were those issues that showed a high level of difficulty in the early days of the sojourn; e, g, "Finding your way around," "Using the transport system," "Understanding cultural differences." All three of these issues emerged

early as important, and had been successfully dealt with by the end of the term. Hypothesis 3 gains support. Some sociocultural issues are more important than others. Some become more easy to deal with from beginning to end of the sojourn; while others do not. Even at the end of the sojourn, some items remained more difficult for Low Initial Adapters. Low and High Initial Adapters for the most part did not report encountering sociocultural issues at different rates. On only three issues were there noticeable differences between the groups, and then only on "Understanding the local value system" did that difference reach statistical significance (p < .05). Sociocultural adaptation is a complex phenomenon which can be better understood by disaggregating average scores.

Sociocultural adaptation and psychological adjustment and process

Total sample results. Across all students (combined High and Low Initial Adapters) sociocultural adaptation was significantly inversely related to reported Anxiety ($r = -.399, p < .01$), Somaticism ($r = -.383, p < .01$), Hostility ($r = -.436, p < .01$), and Depression ($r = -.455, p < .01$). However, sociocultural adaptation was not significantly related to Satisfaction with Life even though the SWLS was significantly inversely related to the above symptom scales. It may be that although satisfaction and lowered psychological symptoms related to each other, the effort involved in learning skills to "fit in" with a foreign culture does not add to student perceptions that their life is better in some ways.

In terms of the process of psychological adjustment, sociocultural adaptation across all students was significantly inversely related to both Negative Affect ($r = -.326, p < .01$), and the stress appraisal strategy of Loss ($r = -.455, p < .01$). That is, students with lower sociocultural adaptation were more likely to report negative feelings concerning their sojourn, and they were more likely to perceive events as harmful or indicative of losing something. The appraisal strategy of loss typically occurs when an individual actually senses that a stressful situation has overpowered them and drained or thwarted important personal resources.

Low vs High Adapter group results. Looked at from the perspective of differences between Low and High Initial Adapters, there were no differences between the groups on any of the psychological symptom measures, but there were differences on Negative Affect, Threat, and Loss (see table 3). Despite beginning their sojourn with lower sociocultural adaptation, the Low Initial Adapter group did not show a significant difference in psychological adjustment from the High Initial Adapter group at the end of the sojourn. Hypothesis 4 is rejected. However, the process of adapting for the Low Initial Adapter

Table 2. Sociocultural Adaptation Scale item frequencies and un-weighted means for three time periods, with First vs End comparisons

Time Periods	Frequency		First Week		Middle Week		End of Term		First vs End
Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale items	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-test
Factor 1: Cultural Empathy and Relatedness									
Making friends	3.56	0.92	2.55	1.39	1.83	.97	2.32	.97	-2.81**
Making yourself understood	4.15	0.78	3.46	.97	2.09	.73	2.80	.81	-4.99***
Communicating with a different ethnic group	3.78	1.13	2.41	1.32	1.68	.77	1.88	.87	-.70
Relating to opposite sex	4.07	0.98	2.22	1.26	1.74	.94	1.83	.95	-.69
Finding your way around	4.14	0.94	3.60	1.18	1.47	.61	1.97	.87	-4.56***
Understanding the local political system	2.56	1.18	2.49	1.19	1.97	.96	1.85	.94	-.14
Understanding the locals' world view	3.15	1.16	2.97	1.06	1.99	.85	2.08	1.04	-.24
Taking a local perspective on the culture	3.49	1.14	2.94	.99	1.83	.70	2.10	.94	-1.73
Understanding the local value system	3.41	1.07	2.92	.94	1.76	.63	2.14	.88	-2.15*
Seeing things from the locals' point of view	3.34	1.01	3.10	.95	1.81	.68	2.22	1.04	-2.76**
Understanding cultural differences	3.73	1.01	2.85	1.06	1.59	.61	1.97	.89	-2.36*
Seeing two sides of an intercultural issue	3.69	1.06	2.47	1.04	1.54	.65	1.86	.83	-3.22**

Factor 2: Impersonal Endeavors and Perils								
Pace of life	3.78	1.04	2.69	1.06	1.44	.61	2.27	.78	-7.21***
Dealing with someone unpleasant	2.88	1.15	3.05	1.05	2.26	.97	2.69	1.08	-3.11**
Food/finding food you enjoy	3.90	1.13	2.39	1.27	1.51	.76	1.93	1.07	-2.65**
Dealing with people in authority	2.36	1.14	1.55	.92	1.38	.72	1.49	.84	-.54
Dealing with the bureaucracy	2.11	1.26	1.79	1.10	1.49	.72	1.61	.98	-.18
Dealing with unsatisfactory service	3.03	1.13	2.76	1.14	2.06	.94	2.33	1.16	-2.79**
Dealing with people staring	3.73	1.17	2.65	1.39	1.71	.96	2.08	1.04	-4.12***
Other								
Transport system	3.78	1.23	3.26	1.15	1.54	.72	1.86	.77	-3.38***
Going shopping	3.53	1.18	2.38	1.11	1.43	.67	1.73	.81	-1.81
Going social events	3.63	1.02	2.28	1.12	1.43	.69	1.63	.69	-.67
Worshipping	2.06	1.28	1.95	1.38	1.72	1.21	1.54	1.16	-.14
Talking about yourself	3.42	0.97	2.49	1.21	1.71	.89	1.90	.92	-.24
Jokes and humor	3.53	0.90	2.88	1.28	1.98	.92	2.17	.89	-1.56
Following rules and regulations	3.49	1.06	1.69	.87	1.38	.57	1.54	.75	-2.8*
Adapting to local housing	3.92	1.13	2.73	.97	1.66	.80	2.12	.98	-3.09**
Dealing with the climate	3.76	1.33	1.55	.85	1.51	.83	1.61	.79	-.16

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Figure 2. Weighted means of Intercultural Empathy items for beginning and end of sojourn for all students
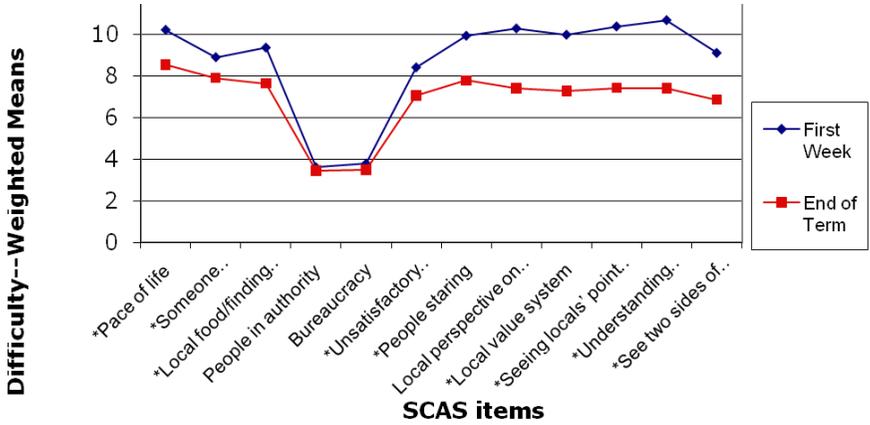
group was fraught with discomfort. They not only reported significantly more negative feelings (e.g. distressed, upset, afraid), they also were responding to sociocultural issues as if they were threats to their abilities to cope, or as actual harm or loss. These affective and cognitive reactions suggest that the Low Initial Adapters' study abroad was a qualitatively different experience than that of the High Initial Adapters'. Hypothesis 5 gains support. Although the outcome of sociocultural adaptation in relation to psychological adjustment was not different for the two groups, the affective and cognitive reactions related to that adaptation describe an experience tinged with distress and difficulty for the Low Initial Adapter group

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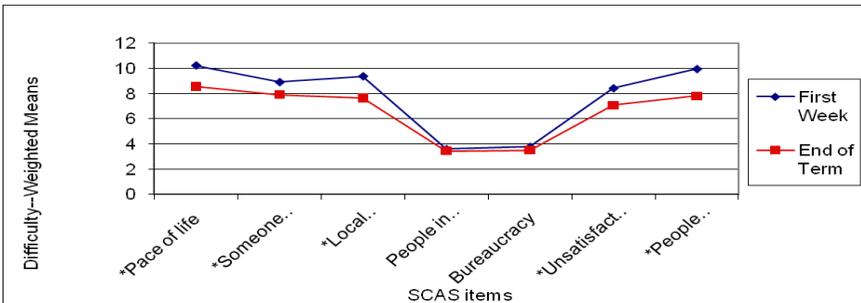**Figure 2. Weighted means of Impersonal Endeavors and Perils items for beginning and end of sojourn for all students**

Table 3. Affect and appraisal comparisons for High and Low Initial Sociocultural Adaptation groups

Variables	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
Affect					
Positive Affect	37.84	0.998	38.565	1.04	*0.253*
Negative Affect	22.76	1.176	19.348	1.226	*4.036**
Appraisal					
Challenge	23.28	0.818	23.783	0.853	*0.181*
Threat	8.8	1.094	5.391	1.141	*4.648**
Loss	4.24	0.61	2.087	0.636	*5.963**

* $p < .05$

Conclusions

Fitting in with a foreign culture can be quite taxing. Responding to acculturative stress can place heavy demands on study abroad students. Some students enter their sojourn able to adapt more quickly than others. This initial adaptation ability has implications for the course of their sociocultural adaptation and the quality of their study abroad experience, though surprisingly not for their ultimate ability to adjust either psychologically or, for the most part, socioculturally. In some ways Low Initial Adapters can be seen as heroic in their persistence in the face of situations that feel threatening and negative. It behooves us to find ways to support and encourage these students.

The problem in providing support, however, is that it is not easy to determine who the lower initial adapters will be based on common sense demographics, personality characteristics, or measured potential for intercultural adjustment. Therefore, we need to look not at the students, but rather at the process of sociocultural adjustment itself for keys in helping students respond positively to the cultural issues that arise. It is clear that close attention to these issues during the first weeks of the students' sojourn is important. Most of the change in this study occurred within the first six weeks; though some issues lingered and reemerged later as well. Sociocultural adaptation is not a once and forever result. Continued attention is necessary.

Another key mode of supporting and encouraging students is to recognize and respond to those sociocultural issues that are likely to occur more frequently, and with which the students are likely to have more difficulty. There will be some variation in the salience of these issues based on the specific culture in which

the student is studying, and the structure of the living and classroom situations. However there do seem to be predictable cross-cultural issues that can be emphasized (Savicki, et al., 2008). Given the struggle of low initial adapters to deal with some sociocultural issues, the "sink or swim" method of unsupported adaptation does not seem to be in the best interests of the students or of the programs in which they study (Selby, 2008).

Although the current study focuses on sociocultural adjustment, such changes do not occur independently of psychological adjustment (Berry, 2005; Ward, 2001). Students change on multiple levels during their study abroad. One type of change is likely to support the other. Attention to and remediation of psychological factors such as negative affect and feelings of threat and loss are likely to help students in their struggles to fit in with a foreign culture. Psychological adjustment is part and parcel of the study abroad experience.

Finally, several limitations with the current study should be mentioned in the service of improving future research on these issues. First, the sample of study abroad students was comparatively small. Attrition in the longitudinal design reduced the final sample size. A larger sample covering a wider number of cultures would be helpful. Second, the retrospective assessment of initial sociocultural adaptation could have introduced error. It is difficult to find a completely satisfactory way to assess an adaptation baseline when participants may have no idea of the meaning of the issues prior to having encountered them. Future research might assess students weekly to establish a better understanding of the course of sociocultural adjustment.

When students return from their studies abroad, the stories they tell about getting along in their host culture reflect their sociocultural adaptation. It is what they, and we, think of when we discuss the challenges and benefits of study abroad. This process needs to be examined in much greater detail.

Author Note

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