



Book Review

The First Time Effect:

The Impact of Study Abroad on College Student Intellectual Development

by Joshua S. McKeown, (2009).

Albany, NY: The University of New York Press.

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This book attempts to describe the relationship between study abroad and intellectual development among American undergraduates. This 160-page volume is based on two assumptions, both of which raise some problematic issues. One is that "study abroad" is a unitary construct rather than a diverse range of programs lasting from a two weeks to over two years that are only loosely connected. Another problematic assumption is whether "intellectual development" is a singular construct that can be measured by a unitary scale. The author relies on Perry's theory (1968, 1970) of intellectual development in which students are thought to move from simple dualistic "right vs. wrong" mindsets towards more pluralistic and contextual ways of thinking. In recent decades Perry's paradigm has been challenged by more variegated models of intellectual development such as those of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), Baxter Magolda (1992), as well as King and Kitchener (1994). This book acknowledges some of those models. However, the universalist claims inherent in the Perry model (which was developed by interviewing Harvard undergraduates in the 1950s and 1960s) will likely strike today's readers as simplistic and retrograde.

McKeown's book is actually a revision of his 2006 Ph.D. philosophy thesis. It employs a classic pre-test/treatment/post-test design that aptly underscores the difficulties of obtaining meaningful large-scale social science data. Let us start with sampling. The researcher asked an unspecified number of administrators at eight university international centers in the USA to solicit student volunteers for a 10-15 minute web survey. From a pool of 1,868 students planning to study abroad at those institutions, only 12.1% ($n=226$) responded to this study's pre- or post- test. From this modest sample, a mere 98 completed both instruments, indicating a panel attrition rate of 62%. This illustrates the problem of providing adequate incentives for large-scale social science research. To McKeown's credit, he compared his sample with larger population estimates through chi square tests and estimated p -values. Based on that information, his sample appeared to be congruent with national norms in terms of gender, extent of previous international experience among respondents, and language used in the host countries.

The instrument upon which this research hinges consists of a single essay prompt and 14 multiple-choice questions. The pre-departure essay prompt asked respondents to describe their "ideal learning environment" and the post-return essay prompt was to "reflect on your discoveries about yourself as a learner." One possible artifact of this approach is that respondents may have felt compelled to write about some sort of "discovery" to fulfill the tacit subtext of the prompt. Quite likely, a better design would have been to include several Likert scale opinion/response statements such as "My learning preferences did not change as a result of my recent study abroad experience." This would provide an additional layer of information.

The essay prompts were rated by two trained raters according to a 9-point scale based on criteria espoused by Perry. A good feature of this study is that the ratings were done by an outside agency, eliminating any possible coding bias by the author. Regrettably, the inter-rater agreement ratio (usually expressed through Cohen's κ) was not indicated for this study. Still, other studies using similar instruments have expressed high levels of inter-rater consistency, so this issue may not be important (McKeown, p. 60, citing Moore, 1990).

Let us now examine the results. The pre-departure essay mean score was 3.09 ($SD=.35$) and post-return score was identical ($SD=.29$). In other words, there was no significant change in the level of "intellectual development" among the respondents as envisioned by Perry: most informants had already developed pluralistic ways of conceptualizing the world. The only statistically significant change was a tendency for those with no previous international experience ($n=50$) to exhibit greater pluralism after their study abroad experiences. However, this slight gain might be accounted for by the tendency of data to regress towards the mean (Newfields, 2011, p. 21-22) rather than a fundamental shift in attitude among the informants.

Despite the lack of substantive results, McKeown suggests that a sort of "first time effect" exists, claiming that, "Students who, prior to study abroad, had traveled abroad previously, for two weeks or longer . . . had significantly higher pre-test scores than their less-traveled peers" (p. 91). McKeown contends that this effect applies to intellectual development rather than linguistic or cultural knowledge. Whereas most study abroad research tends to focus on linguistic or cultural changes reputed to take place overseas, one merit of this book is that it focuses on intellectual development.



Although evidence of a "first time effect" is not convincingly demonstrated by this study in my view, the book stills raises some questions worth exploring. For example, how do programs placing individuals as solitary members into multiple host countries tend to differ from those in which unified student cohorts go overseas to travel/study/live together? The former type of study abroad program is reputed to be more challenging and result in more cross-cultural interaction (McKeown, p. 26, citing Citron, 1996; Thoth, 1998). However, this study indicated that such programs offered no gains in terms of intellectual development.

Another interesting question considered briefly in this study is whether study abroad experiences vary with gender. Some research suggests intellectual development patterns are in fact gender-related (McKeown, p. 23-24, citing Baxter Magolda, 1992; Martin & Rohlich, 1991). However, this study does not support such conclusions. Quite likely, the single-prompt essay was not sensitive enough to detect gender-based changes.

The Bottom Line

My recommendation for this book is somewhat lukewarm. It is very much a work in progress and McKeown acknowledges some of its limitations. My hope is that in several years a more robust scale that is sensitive to a broader range of theories of intellectual development will be developed. I would also encourage a more diverse sampling to include students from outside of the United States. Indeed, readers outside of the USA might wonder how relevant the some of data from this study is to their students. Japanese students, for instance, almost invariably need to use a foreign language when studying abroad. Moreover, as Kinginger (2009, p. 12, 17) mentions, western European students are likely to have significantly more cross-cultural contact prior to formal study abroad and also higher levels of language proficiency than their North American counterparts.

If you have access to the ProQuest database, the entire Ph.D. thesis upon which this book is based is downloadable. The fact that the results of this study (along with two other research projects) are downloadable via Chieffo, McKeown, and Keh (2010) and the first chapter (which provides a theoretical overview of this study) is also available at <http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/61760.pdf> is an additional reason to think twice about making this particular purchase.

- Reviewed by Tim Newfields
Toyo University, Tokyo

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