

Creating an instrument to measure perceptions of preparedness to return home from study abroad

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Abstract

Given the emphasis on international experiences in education, it is important for institutions to support the entire process from early interest to return experiences. It is typical for individuals to be asked if they are prepared to go abroad, but the integration and debriefing on return is usually limited to a culminating grade. This study reviews the efforts to construct a survey to measure students' preparedness to deal with the return home following an international experience. Utilizing a strong literature base and analytic evaluation, the process will improve the knowledge base in the field and improve validity and reliability of the results.

Creating an instrument to measure perceptions of preparedness to return home from study abroad

When working in any field, finding a measure that looks at the concepts researched is a key component in the process. How will one determine when and if a phenomenon is occurring? How will we know what factors contribute to this outcome and how can we compare our findings with other research in the field? A reliable and valid measure is the cornerstone to any research project. A measure allows the work to be repeated and understood in a systematic way. A well designed measure adds a great deal to the field by providing a means to explore a concept more fully and propel the field to a deeper understanding. Allowing for the creation of a measure that has undergone construct and content validity evaluations will assure it is sufficiently prepared to use it in the field. The current study will show how this process unfolds and how a measure is made and improved through analytical evaluation. The goal of the study is to construct a measure to be used in further study.

The current study seeks to provide an analytical evaluation of the process of constructing a measure to look at study abroad student's perceived preparedness to return home from their first study abroad experience. Specifically, it is an attempt to construct a measure that will look at how well students feel they will be able to deal with the pressure and changes they may experience when returning home from a first time study abroad experience. The study begins with conducting an extensive literature review in the area of reentry shock to determine if a measure is needed in the field.

Theoretical Framework

It is estimated that one out of every ten American college students participate in a study abroad program during their undergraduate career (Cash, 1993). Thus this represents a large

portion of the higher education student population and therefore is an area that should be studied in order to make the study abroad experience more enjoyable, effective and educational. The effects of reentry shock cannot be avoided altogether, but they can be greatly alleviated in a variety of ways. One way to discover how reentry can be alleviated is by generating valid measures that can determine when and at what level it is occurring. Many ways reentry shock can be alleviated include institutional policies and programs that help students cope with their cultural experiences. This will help to lessen the effects of reverse culture shock on students studying abroad (Miller, 1993). Thus learning more about reentry shock and how students experience it can increase our ability to aid those students when they return home. If we, as educators and stakeholders, can make students experience with reentry shock a smoother process, one that they are ready to handle, we can increase the educational outcomes of study abroad. Students will gain more from their experience and be better able to share their knowledge and new multi-cultural outlook.

Acknowledging the importance of reentry shock is vital to gaining a greater understanding of a concept that can greatly affect some students returning home from study abroad. This understanding can only be achieved through additional research in the area in order to explore the ins and outs of reentry shock. Culture shock is a widely know concept, but often reentry shock is overlooked, although it is an equally important concept. There is a disconnect in the level of research in the area of culture shock and reentry shock. Countless studies have looked at culture shock and how it affects people, yet far fewer studies have looked at the other side of this issue, what happens when students return home?

Although research in the area is limited it has explored many aspects of reentry shock. This research includes if travelers expectations about there experience were met or violated and

how this affected their experiences with reentry shock, (Martin, Bradford & Rohrllich, 1995). Other studies have looked at help-seeking behavior after returning from abroad, (Gaw, 2000), and the effects of social support on reentry, (Huff, 2001). Research has also looked at demographic factors and cultural identity issues related to reentry, (Cox, 2004; Sussman, 2002; Walling, Ericksson, Meese, Ciofica & Gordon, 2006), and how communication self-efficacy was affected by study abroad (Milstein, 2005). The research fails to look at several aspects of reentry shock. If and how much a student's level of preparedness to experience reentry shock varies. Also, how and if this variation in preparedness ultimately affects their experience with reentry shock?

Several measures exist in the field to measure different aspects of reentry shock. In the area of reentry shock the type of measure most utilized by researchers is a survey. Many surveys are given to participants after their study abroad experience, allowing one-time retrospective views of participants' experiences. One such scale is the Reverse Shock Scale (RSS) from the work of Seiter and Waddell (1989) and Martin (1986). This scale assesses the participant's degree of reentry shock using a 16 item, 7-point Likert-type scale. Another scale that has been used in the research is the Homecomer Culture Shock Scale (HCSS). This scale, developed by Fray in 1988, is a 23-item scale which identifies behavior commonly seen in the literature related to reentry shock.

One closely related scale was used by Sussman (2002). This study utilized two measures related to reentry shock. The first, the Repatriation Preparedness Scale (RPS) assesses a participant's psychological preparation to return home. This measure looked at psychological preparedness to return home using a 10 item Likert-type scale, but did not look at help-seeking and demographic data related to the previous results. Since help-seeking behavior has been

related to decreased reentry distress, the measure created will give a more in-depth view of how preparedness affects reentry.

Methods

The measure created will be in survey format utilizing a web-based survey site. The survey will investigate college students' preparedness to return home from their study abroad experience before they depart. The context of the larger goal will be to see how much students know about reentry shock and their preparedness to return home. This will be explored in future research utilizing the measure. Reentry shock is defined as the shock travelers experience when returning home from traveling abroad (Gaw, 2000). Preparedness to return home will be operationalized for the study as knowledge of reentry shock symptoms as well as belief that symptoms will occur. The study will also look at likelihood to seek help if symptoms occur and activities in which students plan to participate when they return home. Help-seeking and certain activities have been related to lower occurrence reentry shock in the existing literature.

The study follows the creation of a measure to be used in future research in the area of reentry shock in study abroad. The study will include a critical analysis of the literature in the field as well as an evaluation of the existing tools and measures used in existing research in the area. This review will include a look at the needs of the field of study abroad and a look at how this relates and contributes to the knowledge base in the higher education realm.

Operationalization of the preparedness variable will include questionnaire questions about the participant's knowledge that reentry shock symptoms may occur. The study seeks to explore participants knowledge of the symptoms of reentry shock and if they expect them to happen and finally if they feel they are prepared to handle them if they do occur. Seeing the likelihood of using strategies to handle reentry shock as well as likelihood of help-seeking will

be included in the survey. A chart was created outlining each item on the survey and aligning it with the literature that supports its inclusion in the measure. This method insured the proper inclusion for each item according to the literature. Insuring each item had literature support helped streamline the measure and insure it was valid.

The survey items underwent peer review by several colleagues. After each review, the items in the measure were altered to address any issues or suggestions. Additionally, the items in the measure were reviewed by several faculty members. Again, after each review the items in the measure will be altered to address any issues or suggestions. Utilizing several reviews of the measure helps ensure it is clear, readable and appropriate for the intended audience. Several peers and faculty members took the final version of the measure as it is intended to be administered. The measure was also presented to students who have recently studied abroad for review to get their input on their recent reentry experience. The measure will be piloted on a small group of students who are preparing to travel abroad but are not involved in the actual study to be conducted. This administration will help to clarify questions, data collection and analysis methods.

Qualitative questions in the measure are included to support the quantitative questions in various sections. After each section in the measure a qualifying question will be asked to insure participant views are collected. Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis and deductive reasoning. This will create themes in the data that can be used in further research to strengthen quantitative questions. This can also serve to inform further research and refinement of the measure. If themes emerge from the qualitative data, they will be reported along with frequency of response in the results and discussion sections. Such themes will also serve to inform the measure and fine tune survey questions if needed.

Results and conclusions

The researcher found literature that supports the need to address the issue of preparedness to return home from a study abroad experience. Findings include reentry shock often results because of travelers' lack of anticipation for its affects. Also, travelers are surprised by the sense of loss they experience upon their return and are unaware that such loss is a common reaction to reentry (Gaw, 2000). Martin, Bradford & Rohrlich found in their 1995 study that preparation helps ease the effects of reentry shock. Reentry shock is an important issue as multiple studies have shown that the reported stress is higher during reentry into one's home culture than is the stress of entering the new culture (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000).

Students experience a loss of self, values and their current view of home, self, family and friends upon returning as they have to adjust their new ideals in to their former home environment. Thus knowing how students expect to experience such loss and change will show how prepared they are to return home (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Dale, 1996). Students often have a new perception of themselves after returning home. Reentry shock arises because of an individual's need for internal consistency and balance between the conflicting aspects of the host country with the home country (Koester, 1984; Settle, Albers, Blake, Gaw, Hickman, Hogan, et al., 2004)

The final constructed measure consisted of four sections, preparedness for reentry shock, symptoms, help-seeking/ return home activities and demographics. The first section, preparedness for reentry shock, first defined key terms, host and home countries to ensure participants were clear on what each question was asking. The section contains three questions, the first asks participants "How prepared do you think you are to return home from your study

abroad experience?" the question used a Likert-type format from 1-not very prepared to 4-very prepared and included an option of "not sure." The literature shows that reentry shock often results because of travelers' lack of anticipation for its effects (Gaw, 2000) and that travelers are surprised by the sense of loss they experience upon their return and are unaware that such loss is a common reaction to reentry (Martin, Bradford & Rohrlich, 1995). Also research shows that preparation helps ease the effects of reentry shock and lack of preparation for the intercultural experience leads to reentry shock. (Martin, 1993).

Question two asks participants "Compared to entering your host country, how challenging will reentering your home country be?" the question used a 4 point Likert scale, 1-not very challenging to 4- Very challenging. Multiple studies have shown that the reported stress is higher during reentry into one's home culture than is the stress of entering the new culture. (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000). Next participants will be asked "Upon returning home from your study abroad experience, do you anticipate, using a 4 point Likert scale, 1-not very likely to 4-Very likely, and here participants were given several common issues presented in the literature that participants are likely to face upon reentry. An example of such issues is considering changing your major or career path or increased sensitivity to international topics and concerns. The issues participants are asked are a list of some of the likely outcomes of reentry shock, knowing if participants expect to feel them shows that they are aware of the possibility they will occur (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Dale, 1996). Students often see a new view of themselves upon returning home and this can lead to reentry issues, (Koester, 1984).

Participants will then be asked to indicate how much they agree/disagree with several statements using a 4 point Likert-type scale from 1-strongly disagree to 4- strongly agree, related to how they think they will feel upon returning home. Students experience a loss of self, values

and their current view of home, self, family and friends upon returning as they have to adjust their new ideals in to their former home environment. Thus knowing how students expect to experience such loss and change will show how prepared they are to return home (Settle, Albers, Blake, Gaw, Hickman, Hogan, et al., 2004). Familiarity with the home culture leads the traveler to believe that neither they nor their home will have changed since they have been gone (Koester, 1984) Students often have a new perception of themselves after returning home. Reentry shock arises because of an individual's need for internal consistency and balance between the conflicting aspects of the host country with the home country (Settle, Albers, Blake, Gaw, Hickman, Hogan, et al., 2004).

The purpose of these questions is to see if participants identify a difference in home being the same and in them viewing home as the same as well as if they feel they themselves will be the same upon returning home. Students often learn more from their study abroad experience after they return home, which can lead to reentry shock since this may be unexpected. Students are often frustrated with the lack of opportunities to discuss their new experiences after returning from study abroad. (Koester, 1984). Knowing if participants think it will be easy to describe their experiences to others enables us to know if it is in fact unexpected.

In section 2, participants will be asked how much they expect to feel several symptoms of reentry shock as defined in the literature and how long they expected to experience them. These symptoms include excited, exhausted, depressed, anxious, homesick for your host country, alienated from friends and/or family, alienated from society, stressed, confused about your values, concerned about career match. This is a list of some of the likely symptoms of reentry shock, knowing if participants expect to feel them shows that they are aware of the possibility they will occur (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Dale, 1996; Gaw, 1995).

Participants will also be asked how long they expect each of the symptoms to last. Literature has shown that symptoms can last from a month to over a year, so knowing how long a participant expects to experience symptoms show how much they are aware of reentry shock's effects. The last question in the section will ask how likely participants think they would be to talk to a counselor, friend, family member or study abroad advisor or search for information on the internet if they experienced any of the above symptoms. Students who experience high levels of reentry shock are less likely to seek help. Seeing how willing a participant is to seek help if symptoms occur shows their preparedness to deal with symptoms (Gaw, 2000).

The third section of the survey seeks to look at activities participants intended to do upon returning home as well as likelihood of help seeking behavior. Participants will be asked "How likely are you to enroll in a reentry or culture shock class if it was offered?", question used a 4 point Likert scale from 1-not very likely to 4- very likely. This question will be followed by asking participants, "How likely are you to enroll in a reentry or culture shock class if it was suggested to you by a study abroad advisor?" "using a 4 point Likert scale, 1-not very likely to 4-very likely and "How likely are you to enroll in a reentry or culture shock class if it was suggested to you by a former study abroad participant? Using a 4pt Likert scale from 1-not very likely to 4- very likely. Reentry shock can not be avoided, but symptoms can be alleviated through institutional programs and policies (Miller, 1993). Many higher education institutions do not have pre-departure programs that cross-culturally prepare their students to travel abroad. Knowing how willing students are to participate in programs helps to see their willingness to prepare for reentry (Martin, 1989).

Finally this section will ask participants, "When you return home, how likely are you to..." it used a 4 point Likert scale from 1-not very likely to 4 very likely, and will give a list of

activities research has found helps aid in reentry shock, for example getting involved in international activities and writing in a journal. The purpose of this is to see if students plan to participate in such activities, thus leading to better reentry adjustment.

The final section of the measure will ask participants for demographic data including race, gender, age and year in school. This is to explore how reentry varies as a function of race, also research has shown that reentry shock is more likely to be experienced by younger students (Huff, 2001; Cox, 2004). Participants will also be asked if this is their first time studying abroad, first time traveling abroad, if they have ever lived in a foreign country and if they speak a foreign language. Travelers with previous experience overseas cope better to reentry challenges. Research has found that travelers with previous experience tend to cope better with reentry challenges (Cui & Awa, 1992). If participants say “yes” to speaking a foreign language they will be asked if it is the language spoken in their host country. Finally, participants will be asked how long there study abroad trip will last, what country they will be staying in and where they will stay while studying abroad. Literature suggests that length of stay effects reentry shock, as in the longer a person stays abroad the more likely they are to experience reentry shock and that degree of similarity of host and home culture affect reentry shock (Westwood, Lawrence, & Paul, 1986).

Discussion

Limitations of the study are that the measure has yet to be tested and thus has no reliability or validity. A pilot test and/or focus groups were not used in the creation of the measure. In the future, the measure should be further tested before used in the field. A focus group of students preparing to study abroad would be beneficial to ensure the measure is sound. Individual interviews with students, who could serve as participants, would also be beneficial to ensuring the validity of the measure. Another limitation of the measure is since it is measuring

perceived preparedness to return home from study abroad it relies on self-report responses and is not validated by an objective measure.

The work will allow for the creation of a measure that can be utilized in future educational research to discover how perceived preparedness to study abroad affects participants. This will expand the knowledge base in the area and allow for improvement in program planning for future study abroad students. Understanding how students are affected by reentry shock will help educators learn to better prepare their students to return home and ultimately improve their study abroad experience. Study abroad officials and educators could utilize the measure to prescreen students who are more likely to experience reentry shock. Knowing which students are more likely to experience symptoms of reentry shock can help educators better aid those students by providing them resources to assist them. This measure could be used in conjunction with a reentry shock program offered to students before they study abroad.

The measure created can also be utilized in future research to generate a wealth of knowledge in the field. Additional studies utilizing the measure can be conducted to compare students of different levels in college, different ages, genders, or varying lengths of stay in the host country to see if this preparedness/knowledge changes as a function of these variables. Future research can also include a study taking a pre- post-test approach and compare students' perceived preparedness to their reported levels of reentry shock. It would be interesting to discover how prepared students feel they are to return home but also to see how this perceived preparedness affects their actual level of reentry shock. The measure could be used to look at students perceived readiness to return home after their experience and see how and if the typical first time study abroad participant knows about reentry shock and in the long run if this knowledge and perceived readiness affects their actual levels of reentry shock upon their return.

It would also be beneficial to look for differences between graduate and undergraduate level students to see if age and experience in school has an effect. Perceived preparedness to return home from study abroad could also be used in any travel abroad realm to learn more about all reentry experience, not just that of students. Also, it would be interesting to compare a participant's willingness to seek help as indicated in the perceived preparedness measure with their actual help seeking behavior when they return home from study abroad.

Conclusion

Generating a sound measure utilizing analytical evaluation throughout the process will improve the knowledge base in the field and improve validity and reliability of the results. It is important to the field to have a measure that evaluates how prepared students feel to study abroad so we can utilize it to improve policy and programming. Ensuring that students get the most out of their study abroad experience is vital. It is important in order to generate the best educational experience possible. This aids the students themselves in their transition back into their home culture as well as the institutions that will benefit from their increased knowledge and cultural awareness.

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