

Presentation of the Impact of Living Abroad Project (The Kaleidoscope Project)

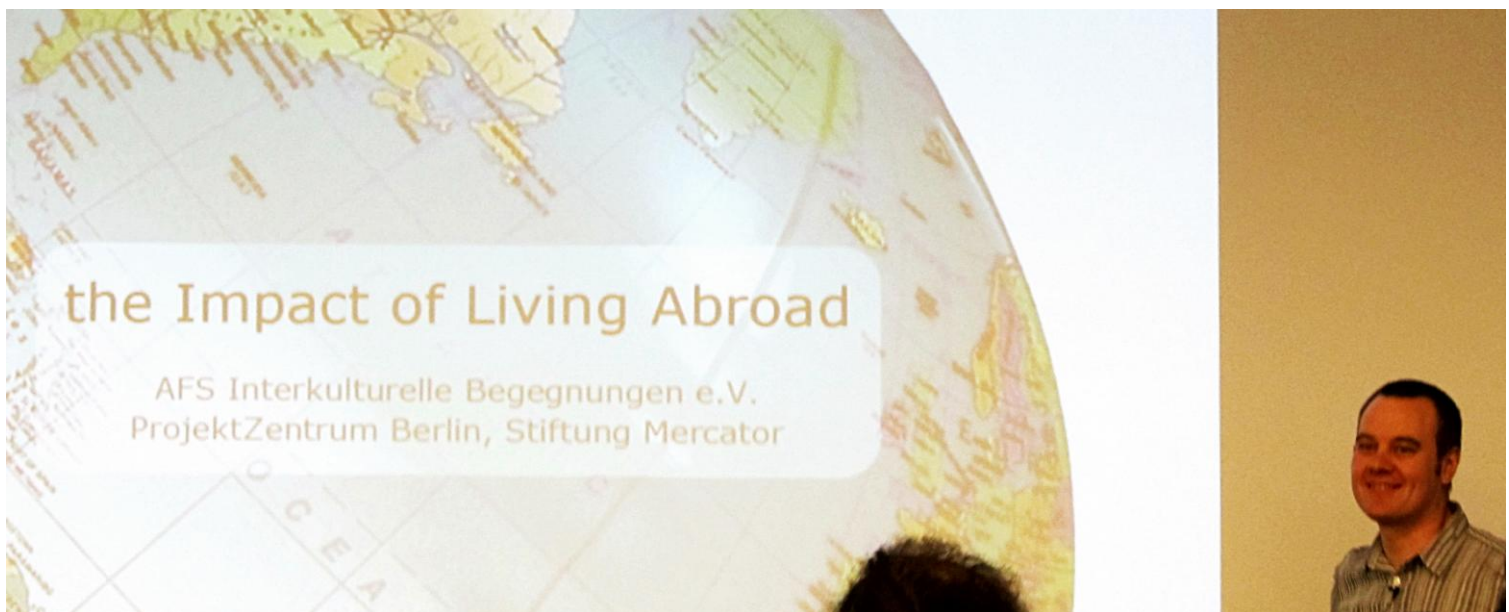


In an innovative 4 year study, researchers from the University of Essex (UK) set out to investigate the impact of living abroad (ILA). In collaboration with AFS, the researchers of the ILA project examined the experiences of intercultural exchange students. A selection of the preliminary findings of the project presented in the Mercator Centre Berlin on November 30, 2012, is highlighted in this overview.

Approximately 2500 sojourners were monitored, all of whom participated in an intercultural exchange program for 10 months. These sojourners lived in around 50 different countries.

sample of German students living abroad (N = 278) and international students being hosted in Germany (N = 255). Next to findings of the general analyses including the entire sample, findings from the German sending and hosting students were also presented.

Findings of the study were discussed with regards to some main research areas: cultural learning, cultural adaptation, and cultural distance. For cultural learning, it was examined whether and how the exchange impacted on different aspects of learning, including cross-cultural competence and language proficiency.



Dr Nicolas Geeraert from the Department of Psychology at the University of Essex (UK) presenting the findings of the study.

Measures were recorded at multiple time points pre-exchange, during the exchange and post return, over a duration of approximately 18 months. Next to the exchange student sample, measures were also collected from a control group of 578 young people who stayed in the home country. The study included a substantial

For cultural adaptation, it was shown how the exchange students adapted to living abroad and what the most effective coping mechanisms were. Finally, the influence of cultural distance on different aspects of the intercultural exchange was considered.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cross-cultural competence was assessed using items from the Cultural Intelligence Scale (Ang, et al., 2007). In this case cross-cultural competence represents the ability to adjust well to new cultural environments and cope well in interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, cross-cultural competence here suggests enjoyment in experiencing new cultures and the ability to vary verbal and non-verbal behaviors to suit different cross-cultural situations.

Sojourners, although already higher in cross-cultural competence than control participants pre-exchange, demonstrated still further development in their cross-cultural competence over the course of their year abroad, whereas there was no change in the control group. There were a number of variables predicting the **increase in cross-cultural competence** from pre- to post-exchange:

- **personality traits** (HEXACO personality inventory, Ashton & Lee, 2009):
 - greater levels on **extraversion** (participants enjoy social occasions, are comfortable being in the centre of attention, are happy to lead or speak to groups, likely to be energetic and enthusiastic in social situations)
 - greater levels on **openness to experience** (participants tend to be interested in art and nature and have a high curiosity towards different domains of knowledge, use their imagination often and are interested in unusual ideas and people)
- good quality **contact with host nationals**
- higher levels on **perspective taking** (Davis, 1980: degree to which participants are good at being able to see a situation from another person's point of view)
- less **intergroup anxiety** (Stephan & Stephan, 1985: degree to which participants felt uncomfortable, uncertain and anxious when imagining interacting with people from different cultures)

Also the **cross-cultural competence** level of the participants prior to the exchange year predicted key sojourn outcomes at a later time point:

- greater **cultural adaptation** (Demes & Geeraert, 2012) on entry into the host country:
 - greater **sociocultural adaptation** (adaptation to behavioral and practical elements such as the climate, language, making friends, the food, pace of life)

- greater **psychological adaptation** (emotional and psychological side of adapting to a new place: frequency of feeling happy or excited, homesick or out of place)
- higher **well-being**:
 - **less perceived stress** (Cohen, et al., 1983: extent to which participants perceived their life to be stressful at the time of measurement)
 - **less state anxiety** (Spielberger et al., 1983: feeling tense or worried as opposed to calm and relaxed at the time of measurement)
 - **higher self-esteem** (Rosenberg, 1965: degree to which participants held a positive or negative attitude towards themselves)
 - **higher satisfaction with life** (Diener, et al., 1985: happiness with life in general)
- more **positive evaluation** of the sojourn at mid stay, both in general terms and in terms of a number of sojourn specific aspects such as social life, family life and school
- less **intergroup anxiety**

An intercultural exchange clearly led to cultural learning. AFS students increased both their levels of bi-cultural learning (culture specific knowledge for the home and host culture for elements such as values and beliefs, rules for non-verbal behavior, the legal and economic systems of the country) and cross-cultural competence. While the former gives them expertise knowledge with regards to both their home and host culture, the latter provides them with skills that are transferable to other cultural contexts. This is at the center of the AFS mission statement, and it is reassuring to see that the exchange really impacts upon the AFS students in this manner.

Knowing which variables are likely to enhance cultural learning may provide opportunities to create the optimal learning conditions.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Proficiency in the host language was measured along four language domains: listening, reading, speaking and writing. These self-reported measures were based on CEF DIALANG, 2008.

Across many different host languages, students demonstrated a high degree of learning, marked by significant increases in self-reported language proficiency from pre- to post-exchange. Importantly, students' language learning was inclusive for all four domains of language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. On average, across all host languages and all four domains, students reached advanced or near advanced proficiency levels – a very impressive and valuable outcome of the intercultural exchange.

The results show that, in general, students travelling to English speaking countries were at a clear advantage in terms of language proficiency on entering the host country. Proficiency in the Scandinavian languages appeared to be the weakest of all pre-exchange, but these students made very strong progress in their host language over the course of their sojourn.

Those who appeared to make the most **progress in their host language** in general were those with greater levels on the following variables beforehand:

- **Personality traits:**
 - greater levels on **honesty-humility** (participants are not tempted to break rules or use other people for their own gain, not interested in having wealthy and luxurious possessions or a high social status)
 - greater levels on **extraversion**
 - greater levels on **consciousness** (participants are organized, strive for perfection in their tasks and think very carefully before committing themselves to a decision)
- higher **quality contact with host nationals**
- higher **acculturation orientation** towards the **host country** (Demes & Geeraert, 2012: placing higher importance on engaging with the host culture while abroad)
- lower **acculturation orientation** towards the **home country** (Demes & Geeraert, 2012: placing higher importance on engaging with the home culture while abroad)
- greater **cross-cultural competence**
- higher **autonomous motivation** (Chirkov, et al., 2008: extent to which participants were motivated to travel for personal and intrinsic reasons rather than external reasons, e.g. pressure from parents)

- lower level of **intergroup anxiety**
- lower level of **perceived cultural distance** (Demes & Geeraert, 2012: difference between the home and host culture as perceived by the participants in terms of people, values and beliefs, food, pace of life, making friends etc.).

Further, in general, a **higher language proficiency** of the students during the first half of the exchange predicted the following variables:

- better **sociocultural adaptation**
- better **psychological adaptation**
- higher levels on **well-being:**
 - **less perceived stress**
 - **less state anxiety**
 - **higher self-esteem**
 - **higher satisfaction with life**
- more **positive evaluation** of the sojourn at mid stay, both in general terms and in terms of a number of sojourn specific aspects such as social life, family life and school
- greater **advances in bi-cultural learning**
- less **intergroup anxiety**



Welcoming speech and introduction by Mick Petersmann, National Director of AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V., and Annette Gisevius, Director of Intercultural learning Department, AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V.

CULTURAL DISTANCE

The cultural distance measure (Demes & Geeraert 2012) assessed the difference between the home and host culture as perceived by the participants in terms of people, values and beliefs, food, pace of life, making friends etc.

The findings show that the **perceived cultural distance** does relate to the following macro-level indicators or objective measures of distance:

- change in **continent**
- change in **religion**
- change in **temperature**
- **HDI - Human Development Index (UN)**

Also, differences in psychological values derived from three different frameworks – that of **Schwartz Value Inventory**, **Hofstede's cultural dimensions** and the **GLOBE project** – were related to a greater **perceived cultural distance**, i.e. perceived differences between the home and host country.

The **well-being** levels of the participants, indicated by their perceived stress and their satisfaction with life, were also predicted by various types of cultural distance measures, namely by change in **religion**, change in **language**, change in **HDI (UN)**, changes along the **Hofstede dimensions** and by differences in the subjectively **perceived cultural distance** – the greater the changes were, the lower were their well-being levels.

German students travelling to Latin America and Asia perceived greater cultural distance than those travelling to Europe and North America. On average, from entry to mid-stay, levels of perceived distance appeared to remain stable.

Regarding the cultural adaptation – for both sociocultural and psychological adaptation – the German students travelling abroad were more adapted on entry than they expected to be, regardless of the hosting continent.



Panel discussion of the results by the researcher Dr Nicolas Geeraert and members of the Advisory Council of AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V.

Different forms of cultural distance were also related to the cultural adaptation of the participants. A poorer **sociocultural adaptation** was predicted by objective cultural and geographical differences, namely change in **religion**, change in **language**, change in **temperature** as well as by change in **HDI (UN)** as a socio-economical difference. Greater differences between the home and host country on the **Schwartz values** and the **Hofstede dimensions** and a greater **perceived cultural difference** were also related to poorer sociocultural adaptation. A poorer **psychological adaptation** was predicted by change in **religion**, change in **language**, change in **HDI (UN)** and subjectively greater **perceived cultural difference** but not by differences between levels of psychological values.

Overall, those travelling to North America appeared to be the most adapted socio-culturally, and those travelling to Asia the least adapted. The psychological adaptation of German students sent to Asia seemed to decrease over time on average, while the psychological adaptation of those travelling to North America, Europe and Latin America remained more stable.

COPING STRATEGIES

The adapted COPE scale (Carver, 1997) measured the extent to which participants employed a number of different coping strategies during difficult times over the course of the project and how these relate to later well-being and adaptation.

As expected, the following **functional (positive) strategies** were positively related to higher levels of sojourner adaptation (sociological and psychological) and general well-being (higher level of self-esteem and lower level of stress):

- use of **emotional support** from people in the **host country** (e.g. I get comfort and understanding from someone here in the host country)
- use of **instrumental support** from people in the **host country** (e.g. I get help and advice from people I met in the host country)
- positive **reframing** (e.g. I look for something good in what has happened)
- **active coping** (e.g. I take action to try to improve the situation)
- **acceptance** (learning to live with it)
- **planning**

On the other hand, the following **dysfunctional coping reactions** were negatively related to cultural adaptation and well-being:

- behavioral **disengagement** (e.g. I give up trying to deal with it)
- **denial** (e.g. I refuse to believe it has happened)
- **internet use** (e.g. I spend time on social networking sites or home country websites)
- **self-blame** (e.g. I criticize myself)
- use of **emotional support** from people in the **home country**
- use of **instrumental support** from people in the **home country**
- **self-distraction** (engaging in other activities to take mind off things)
- **substance abuse** (using alcohol to feel better)

On average, participants used functional strategies more than dysfunctional coping strategies, which is encouraging to learn. The results suggest that people in the host country may be a more powerful source of support than relying too much on support back in the home country or using the internet.

PRESENTATION DATE

November 30, 2012

LOCATION

Mercator Centre Berlin, Germany

INVOLVED PROJECT PARTNERS

University of Essex

AFS Intercultural Programs

AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

The presentation and this summary are based on The Impact of Living Abroad research report:

Geeraert, N., & Demes, K. (2012). The Impact of Living Abroad: Research Report. Colchester (UK): University of Essex.

The preliminary findings in this overview were compiled by AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V. in collaboration with the researchers Dr. Nicolas Geeraert and Kali Demes.

Further information about the project will be published in 2013 on the project web page: www.ilaproject.org

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