The Experiences of American International Students in a Large Irish University

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Abstract

Growing numbers of American students are travelling overseas to study abroad and enroll in full degree programs. Despite this trend, relatively little is known about the experiences of United States (U.S.) students abroad. The aim of this research was to examine the experiences of American international students in Ireland. Findings suggest that while U.S. students experience some adaptation problems, overall, they adapt well to studying in Ireland. Subtle differences in long-term and short-term international students' levels of social support and academic satisfaction were also detected. This research has important practical implications for facilitating the adaption of U.S. students abroad. At a time when many governments and academic institutions are devising strategies to attract international students, this research is timely and necessary.

Keywords: international students; psychological wellbeing; sociocultural adaptation; cross-cultural adjustment.

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The field of international education is dynamic and expanding rapidly. The U.S. is one of the leading host destinations for students wishing to enhance their education through an international perspective, with around 19% of all international students studying in American higher education institutions (HEIs). However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of U.S. college students travelling overseas to pursue study abroad academic degree programs. Recent reports have shown that 273,996 American students participated in study abroad programs in 2009/2010 and approximately 43,000 students from the U.S. pursued full degrees at the postsecondary level worldwide in 2011 (Institute of International Education, 2012; Open Doors, 2012). Of this group, approximately 4,400 students studied in Ireland during the 2011/2012 academic year (Education Ireland, 2012). Study abroad programs have become a key component of American HEIs' commitments to internationalization, and there is a belief among educators that such exchanges have many benefits for students, including enhanced adaptability, increased openness to cultural diversity and, in some cases, improved proficiency in a foreign language (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Dolby, 2007; Hunley, 2010).

Experiences of U.S. International Students

Despite the drive among global educators to attract larger numbers of American international students to their institutions, research has shown that some U.S. students experience difficulties abroad (O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Citron, 1996; Dolby, 2007; Pitts, 2009). Adjusting to a new academic environment has been shown to be particularly stressful for international students (Coates & Dickinson, 2012; Chung, Kelliher, & Smith, 2006). Pitts (2009) found that the academic expectations of American

students on study abroad programs in Europe were frequently unrealistic, with many students feeling shocked when they discovered that their academic responsibilities abroad were equivalent to those in their home country. Other studies have shown that U.S. students travelling to a country where English is not the first language sometimes face language difficulties which negatively impacts on their overall adjustment (Savicki, Adams, Wilde, & Binder, 2008). Language difficulties may also be experienced in Anglophone contexts. For example, American study abroad students who travelled to a country where the local language was English reported having difficulty understanding local accents and idiomatic expressions (O'Reilly et al., 2010).

As a consequence of experiencing linguistic demands, Citron (1996) found that American international students tend to retreat into their conational networks with other American students, leading to less cultural engagement. Cultural engagement has been extolled as a major benefit of studying abroad. Sociocultural adaptation, defined by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992) as an individual's ability to "fit in" or execute effective interactions in a host environment, is sometimes problematic for American international students (Kenyon, Frohard-Dourlent, & Roth, 2012; Savicki, 2010; Savicki et al., 2008). In one study, Kenyon et al. (2012) found that American students studying in Canada encountered difficulties familiarizing themselves with host country bureaucracy and expressed frustration at the unexpected nature of these difficulties. The sociocultural adaptation of American students may also be affected by prevailing attitudes toward Americans in the countries in which they sojourn. A number of studies have demonstrated that anti-American attitudes and stereotypes about Americans negatively affect U.S. international students' adjustment (Dolby, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012). For example, Dolby (2007) recounted that participants in her study had some unpleasant interactions about American politics with host nationals due to negative perceptions about their home country. As a result, students reported consciously trying not to appear as a "typical American."

Social networks play an important role in international students' adjustment. Research indicates that forming friendships with host nationals is important because students who do so ultimately adjust to college life abroad more effectively (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Trice, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). However, research with American international students has shown that many students find it difficult to form friendships with local students (Kenyon et al., 2012; Pitts, 2009). Pederson, Neighbors, Larimer and Lee (2011) argue that such difficulties ultimately hinder their cultural experience and are associated with higher levels of homesickness. However, other researchers have emphasized the importance of maintaining such conational ties since these networks appear to provide comfort and stability for students (Afshar-Mohajer & Sung, 2002; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pitts, 2009). Pitts (2009) found that U.S. study abroad students used their conational networks as a resource to help them make the cognitive, behavioural and affective adjustments necessary to succeed abroad.

A further significant stressor for international students is financing their sojourn. Despite assumptions that many international students who go abroad are wealthy, Pitts (2009) found that managing finances was of major concern to study abroad students. Financial stressors can distract international students from their academic studies, adversely affect their sense of stability, and threaten the status that students have become accustomed to in their home country (Akande, 1994; Clark Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991; Lacina, 2002; Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014; Walker, 1999). It is important for educators to pay attention to students' difficulties relating to finance, social support, perceived discrimination, sociocultural adaptation, language and academic adjustment, as such difficulties can have potentially detrimental effects on international students' psychological and physical health (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Trice; 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Hunley (2010) has shown that psychological distress is a central feature of students' cross-cultural adaptation, specifically for American international students.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the model of cross-cultural adaptation proposed by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy,

1992; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991). This model distinguishes between two domains of cross-cultural adaptation: (a) psychological adaptation (i.e., psychological wellbeing or satisfaction in a new cultural environment) and (b) sociocultural adjustment. Ward and Kennedy (1993) propose that psychological adaptation can best be understood in terms of a stress and coping framework and that sociocultural adaptation is best explained within a social skills or culture learning paradigm. This framework has much strength; for example, rather than emphasizing the negative aspects of cross-cultural adaptation such as culture shock, it describes both social and affective components of adaptation, and views maladjustment as one outcome of the transition experience (James, Hunsley, Navara, & Alles, 2004; Oberg, 1960). Ward and Searle's (1991) theory of cross-cultural adaptation is one of the most comprehensive models in this area and was thus chosen as a framework for this research.

This study explores the adaptation of both studying abroad for one semester or one academic year, and long-term degree seeking study abroad American international students. It is important to distinguish between these two groups as researchers have highlighted the need to take the characteristics of a sojourning group into account when investigating their experiences (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). In terms of differences between the two groups, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) propose that study abroad programs provide advantages that longer sojourns do not, including affordability, academic flexibility, and a time-frame and program that may seem less risky to students who are apprehensive about spending a longer period of time abroad. However, other research has shown that studying abroad brings with it particular stressors related to academic adjustment (Pitts, 2009). Compounding these problems, Pitts (2009) has proposed that study abroad programs do not afford students as many opportunities for intercultural growth, although the impact of this on American students' experiences is unclear. Also uncertain is the role that social support plays in the adaptation of study abroad versus long-term American international students. For example, O'Reilly (2011) has highlighted how study abroad students are generally more likely to be part of a structured program and invited to attend events organized by the host institution. As a result of this, they may find it easier to make friends with conational and other international students; something which has been shown to be highly effective for study abroad students in easing their adaption, but not in gaining the maximum cultural benefit from the exchange.

The aims of this study are to examine the cross-cultural adaptation of American international students in Ireland using Ward and Searle's framework, specifically by (a) exploring the experiences of study abroad and long-term American international students, and (b) comparing their experiences to those of a sample of host Irish students. The data used in this study were gathered as part of a larger research project exploring the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of a diverse group of international students in Ireland, the findings of which are detailed by O'Reilly et al. (2010) and O'Reilly, Hickey and Ryan (2013).

Method

Data Collection

Full ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Board at the institution where this research was carried out. In accordance with data protection guidelines, an e-mail was initially sent by the institution's international office on behalf of the researchers to a list of students who met the definition of an international student (i.e., not an Irish citizen, resident or of Irish nationality). An e-mail was also sent to all Irish students by the relevant administration office. This e-mail contained an invitation to take part in the study with a link to a secure online website, and a reminder e-mail was sent to students after one week. Participation in this study was voluntary. To increase the response rate, the survey was administered midway through the first semester of the 2009/2010 academic year at a time when students were not taking exams. The estimated response rates in this study were 18.76% for international students and 4.95% for host students.

Participants

For the purposes of this study, data from international students who identified themselves American (*n* = 150) were extracted from a larger data set (29.58% of the total sample). A random sample of 149 host students (constituting 17% of the total sample of Irish students) was also extracted. Of the 150 American participants, 99 were study abroad students and 51 were long-term international students (see Table 1).

As this table shows, the majority of study abroad (71.7%) and long-term (68.6%) students were female. Study abroad students were most likely to be undergraduate students (71.7%) and studying Arts & Celtic Studies (51.5%). On the other hand, American students enrolled in long-term programs were most likely to be postgraduate students (82.4%), and the majority of long-term international students were studying Arts & Celtic Studies (29.4%) or Life Sciences (29.4%). The majority of host students were also female (63.1%) undergraduate students (79.2%) studying Arts & Celtic Studies (29.5%).

Measures

First, all participants completed a socio-demographic questionnaire designed by the authors which included questions on gender, faculty, time of arrival, degree level and academic satisfaction. Second, all participants completed the Measure of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) which assesses perceptions of social support from friends, family and a significant other. Responses to 12 items are scored on a seven-point scale and higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived social support. Next, participants completed the College Stress Inventory (CSI; Solberg et al., 1991) which comprises 25 stress items measuring academic, financial and social stress. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of stress. Finally, all participants completed the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002). The K10 contains ten items which asks respondents to rate how often they have experienced various forms of distress in the previous 30 days. Higher scores on this measure indicate higher levels of psychological distress.

Table 1
Socio-demographic Characteristics of American and Host Student Samples (*N* = 299)

Characteristic	American Long-term	American Study abroad	Host (Irish) Students
	M(SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)
Age	25.46 (3.97)	20.85 (1.45)	24.11 (7.43)
Time post-arrival*	14.33(19.15)	3.62 (5.34)	28.32 (21.52)
	n(%)	*n*(%)	*n*(%)
Sex			
Female	35 (68.6)	71 (71.7)	94 (63.1)
Male	16 (31.4)	28 (28.3)	55 (36.9)
Degree Level			
Undergraduate	9 (17.6)	93 (93.9)	118 (79.2)
Postgraduate	42 (82.4)	6 (6.1)	31 (20.8)
Faculty			
Arts and Celtic Studies	15 (29.4)	51 (51.5)	44 (29.5)
Business & Law	10 (19.6)	26 (26.3)	26 (17.4)
Engineering, Maths & Physical Science	6 (11.8)	9 (9.1)	36 (24.2)
Human Sciences	5 (9.8)	4 (4.0)	10 (6.7)
Life Sciences	15 (29.4)	9 (9.1)	33 (22.2)
Total	51 (100)	99(100)	149 (100)

* Time post-arrival refers to the number of months that have passed between participants' arrival in Ireland (long-term and study abroad international students) or enrollment in the university (host students) and data collection

International students also completed a measure of English language proficiency designed by the author. In addition, they completed the Index of Sojourner Social Support (ISSS; Ong & Ward, 2005). The ISSS is an 18-item measure which contains two subscales capturing socioemotional and instrumental support, and higher scores indicate better levels of social support. Two measures of social support were used to capture the specific levels of long-term international students' social support (Ong & Ward, 2005) and to allow for comparisons between the host sample and international student groups. The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) was also administered to international students. The SCAS has 29 items measuring the amount of difficulty experienced in a number of everyday activities, and higher scores indicate higher levels of sociocultural difficulties. Finally, international students completed the General Ethnic Discrimination Scale (GED; Landrine et al., 2006). Each of the 18 items on this scale assesses the frequency of discrimination in a different arena and asks participants to rate the stress level of their experiences. These measures were chosen as they have been shown to be reliable and valid in similar studies with college students, including international students. The reliability of the scales in this study was very good as Cronbach's alpha for the study instruments ranged between .74 and .97.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were first carried out to provide an insight into international students' experiences in Ireland. A series of one-way between-groups multivariate analyses (MANOVAs), between-groups analysis of variance tests (ANOVAs) and post-hoc analyses were then used to explore differences between long-term international students, study abroad students and host students.

Table 2
Mean (Standard Deviations) for American and Host Student Participants

	Measure	Range	American Long-term	American Study Abroad	Host (Irish) Students
			$n = 51$	$n = 99$	$n = 149$
Demographic	Academic satisfaction	1-6	4.31 (0.97)	4.02 (0.66)	4.08 (1.05)
Social	Social support (MSPSS)	1-7	5.62 (0.97)	5.86 (0.72)	5.51 (1.08)
Support	Significant other support	1-7	5.52 (1.4)	5.66 (0.73)	5.48 (1.48)
	Family support	1-7	5.66 (1.23)	6.03 (0.96)	5.56 (1.21)
	Friends support	1-7	5.66 (1.19)	5.95 (0.73)	5.5 (1.11)
	Social support (ISSS)	1-90	58.79 (16.51)	56.40 (13.75)	-
	Instrumental support	1-45	31.23 (8.92)	28.62 (7.95)	-
	Socioemotional support	1-45	27.89 (8.4)	27.78 (6.93)	-
Cultural	Sociocultural adaptation	1-145	50.86 (12.7)	49.93 (13.34)	-
	Discrimination frequency	1-108	20.83 (4.39)	19.79 (4.97)	-
	Discrimination appraisal	1-108	21.86 (8.54)	19.1 (4.22)	-
Psychological	College stress	0-100	15.73 (10.6)	19.96(11.52)	20.14(13.51)
Wellbeing	Academic stress	0-40	6.9 (4.96)	8.1 (5.49)	11.42 (7.24)
	Financial stress	0-28	4.61 (4.94)	3.81 (3.8)	4.74 (5.36)
	Social stress	0-32	3.82 (3.5)	4.71 (3.48)	4.08 (3.69)
	Psychological distress	10-50	19.22 (5.61)	18.29 (5.83)	20.36 (6.95)

Results

Inspection of mean and standard deviation scores suggested that American international students were not experiencing significant adaptation difficulties. Subtle differences between international student groups were detected when these scores were examined, while differences between international students and their host (Irish) peers were also observed (see Table 2).

Results from the first MANOVA examining differences between long-term ($n = 40$) and study abroad ($n = 76$) international students on the measures of social support, sociocultural adaptation, college stress, academic satisfaction, perceived discrimination (GED frequency) and psychological wellbeing revealed there was a statistically significant difference between groups, $F (7, 108) = 2. 392$; $p = .026$; Pillai's Trace = .13, partial eta squared = .13. Long-term American international students had significantly higher levels of academic satisfaction than study abroad students (see Table 3). The second MANOVA examining differences between long-term international students ($n = 43$) and study abroad students ($n = 84$) on the subscales of the MSPSS, ISSS and CSI showed a statistically significant difference between groups, $F (8, 118) = 2.208$; $p = .031$; Pillai's Trace = .13, partial eta squared = .13. Here, long-term international students reported significantly higher levels of instrumental social support than students on study abroad programs (see Table 3).

A third MANOVA comparing the experiences of long-term American international students ($n = 45$), study abroad students ($n = 87$) and host students ($n = 108$) on measures of social support (MSPSS), college stress, academic satisfaction and psychological distress revealed a significant difference between the three groups, $F (8, 470) = 2.917$; $p = .003$; Pillai's Trace = .1, partial eta squared = .05. Significant differences were observed on the measures of perceived social support, college stress and psychological distress (see Table 4).

Table 3
Differences between American Students on Long-Term and Study Abroad Programs

	American Long-term M (SD)	American Study abroad M (SD)	F ($df = 1, 114$)	p
Academic satisfaction	4.45 (0.85)	4.01 (0.66)	9.364	.003*
Perceived social support	5.64 (0.86)	5.82 (0.74)	1.342	.249
Sojourner social support	58.87 (15.85)	56.64 (14.63)	0.575	.450
Perceived discrimination*[1]	21.03 (4.41)	19.91 (5.08)	1.383	.242
Sociocultural adaptation	50.03 (12.22)	48.86 (14.14)	0.196	.659
College stress	14.75 (8.68)	15.96 (11.24)	0.354	.553
Psychological distress	19.05 (4.94)	18.47 (6.17)	0.261	.611
	American Long-term M (SD)	American Study abroad M (SD)	F ($df = 1, 114$)	p
Socioemotional support	28.16 (7.95)	27.83 (6.92)	0.58	.810
Instrumental support	31.72 (8.36)	28.34 (7.87)	5.014	.027*
Academic stress	7.00 (4.85)	7.58 (4.56)	0.445	.506
Financial stress	4.05 (3.84)	3.71 (3.7)	0.224	.637
Social stress	3.81 (3.69)	4.58 (3.37)	1.389	.241
Friends social support	5.73 (1.04)	5.95 (0.73)	1.87	.174
Family social support	5.72 (1.21)	6.06 (0.9)	3.315	.071
Significant other social support	5.57 (1.35)	5.67 (1.07)	0.194	.661

*[1] Frequency of perceived discrimination; appraisal of discrimination not included so as to avoid violating assumption of multicollinearity

Although no significant differences in levels of psychological distress were observed, F (2, 277) = 2.933; p = .055, there were significant differences on the measures of perceived social support, F (2, 292) = 3.981; p =.02, *power* = .026 and college stress, F (2, 294) = 3.924; p = .038, *power* = .021. Post-hoc analyses revealed that study abroad students had significantly higher levels of perceived social support (d = .35) than Irish students, while American students in long-term programs had significantly lower levels of college stress compared to Irish students (d = -4.42).

A final MANOVA examining differences between the American student groups and Irish students on the MSPSS and CSI subscales revealed a significant difference between the groups, F (12, 528) = 5.916; p = .000; Pillai's Trace = .24, partial eta squared = .12. Significant differences were observed on the measures of academic stress, and perceived friends and family social support (see Table 4). There were significant differences on the measures of perceived support from friends, F (2, 290) = 5.795; p = .003, *power* = .038 and family, F (2, 291) = 5.095; p = .007, *power* = .034. Study abroad students reported higher levels of perceived support from family (d = .47) and friends (d = .45) than Irish students. Results also showed a significant difference in levels of academic stress between groups, F (2, 285) = 13.076; p = .000, *power* = .84. Irish students reported significantly higher levels of academic stress than American international students in long-term (d = 4.52) and study abroad (d = 3.33) programs.

Table 4
Differences between Long-term and Study Abroad American International Students and Host National Students

	American Study Abroad *M* (SD)	American Long-term *M* (SD)	Host *M* (SD)	*F* (*df* = 2, 237)	*P*
Academic satisfaction	4.03 (0.69)	4.4 (0.89)	1.02 (4.14)	2.532	.082
College stress	16.23 (10.93)	15.4 (8.69)	20.79 (14.17)	4.768	.009*
Psychological distress	18.36 (5.87)	19.22 (5.67)	20.69 (6.75)	3.459	.033*
Perceived social support	5.83 (0.71)	5.6 (0.9)	5.5 (0.93)	3.194	.043*
	American Study Abroad *M* (SD)	American Long-term *M* (SD)	Host *M* (SD)	*F* (*df* = 2, 269)	*P*
Family support	6.07 (0.90)	5.68 (1.23)	5.56 (1.21)	5.887	.003*
Friends support	5.96 (0.73)	5.73 (1.07)	5.51 (1.07)	6.05	.003*
Significant other support	5.67 (1.10)	5.53 (1.42)	5.5 (1.47)	.469	.626
Social stress	4.71 (3.43)	3.75 (3.55)	3.95 (3.62)	1.673	.190
Academic stress	7.74 (4.52)	6.72 (4.77)	11.19 (7.1)	14.16	.000*
Financial stress	3.75 (3.73)	4.11 (4.31)	4.79 (5.48)	1.353	.260

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of long-term and study abroad American international students in Ireland. One clear finding to emerge is that American international students reported mainly positive experiences. For example, long-term international students reported lower levels of overall college stress compared to host students. This is an important finding and one which should be highlighted as research on international students tends to emphasize students' adaptation problems. Some studies have shown that many international students adapt well to life in a new country (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Berno & Ward, 2004; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002;

Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Often, the positive aspects of cross-cultural adaptation are overlooked and an emphasis is placed on the negative aspects of international students' experiences abroad.

In understanding the positive outcomes for American students, it should be noted that study abroad students reported having higher levels of social support compared to Irish students. A relevant factor is that most of the American study abroad students in the study institution are housed with other international students in on-campus accommodation or else tend to live with other international students from their home university in designated off-campus accommodation. This may be helpful in providing students with additional sources of social support and these conational networks are likely to have provided students with comfort and stability (Afshar-Mohajer & Sung, 2002; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Typically, there are also a number of structures put in place in home and host institutions to support study abroad students. For example, at the institution where this research was carried out there is a dedicated administrative unit to support North American students on study abroad programs. Such resources are likely to impact on students' levels of social support.

Typically, friendships with other international students and overseas ties act as a source of socioemotional support for international students while friendships with host nationals are a source of instrumental social support (Ong & Ward, 2005). The current study showed that American students in long-term academic stays had significantly higher levels of instrumental social support compared to study abroad students. That is, American long-term international students appear to have formed more friendships with host students which they were able to use as a way of obtaining tangible assistance and informational support. Thus, while living with other study abroad international students may have benefitted students in facilitating their access to supportive friendships with other international students, at the same time this may have reduced their impetus to engage with host nationals. Ultimately, this is something which Pederson and colleagues (2011) have argued hinders international students' experiences abroad. However, while study abroad students may have missed out somewhat on the benefits of interacting more with host students, the lower levels of instrumental social support reported by study abroad students did not significantly increase their levels of sociocultural or psychological difficulties.

This finding may have been impacted by length of time abroad, as the long-term international students in this study were living in Ireland longer than their study abroad peers. Thus, they may have had more time to develop relationships with domestic/host students. Studies examining the relationship between length of residence abroad and international students' adaptation have provided conflicting results. Although some studies have found evidence to support the hypothesis that length of residence and international students' adaptation are related (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Zhang, 2009), others have found no support for this association (Ye, 2006; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Kelly, & Wu, 2007).

The critical importance of considering the issue of international students' academic adjustment has been highlighted here and elsewhere (Chung et al., 2006; Pitts, 2009). It is therefore noteworthy that this study revealed American international students had significantly lower levels of academic stress than host students. This finding does not accord with the general literature which shows that international students tend to experience academic adjustment difficulties which are attributable to several factors (Coates & Dickinson, 2012; Chung et al., 2006; Pitts, 2009). One possibility is that American international students are more able academically than general samples of host students. Relevant to this was the observation that there were differences in levels of academic satisfaction within the American international student sample. While study abroad students are often viewed as academic tourists with few academic stressors, findings from this study revealed American long-term international students are actually more satisfied academically than their peers on study abroad programs. This finding may be linked to the fact that study abroad students have to adjust very quickly to a new institution's methods of teaching and assessment since their grades are frequently taken into account by their home institution. On the other hand, long-term international students have the opportunity to acquaint themselves over a longer time period to the host institution's teaching and learning practices as well as to the expectations in the host institution. Indeed, this finding accords with the suggestion put forward by Pitts (2009) that American study abroad students often have unrealistic expectations about their academic responsibilities abroad. Another factor that may have contributed to this finding is the

different composition of the American students in short and long-stay programs. The majority of students sampled here in the former category were undergraduate students, while most of the American students in long-stay programs were postgraduates. Previous research has indicated that there are some differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students depending on what aspect of adaptation is being studied (Yanhong Li & Kaye 1998; Rienties & Tempelaar 2013). Thus, it may have been the case that differences in academic adjustment were to some extent linked with stage of study and further research is needed on this issue.

Although American international students appeared to be reasonably well adjusted inspection of their mean scores revealed they were experiencing moderate levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties. This finding supports the results of Kenyon et al.'s (2012) study which showed that American students studying in culturally similar country to the U.S. encountered a range of sociocultural challenges. Another issue of some concern is that American international students reported moderate levels of distress. However, this finding must be interpreted against the backdrop of the relatively high levels of psychological distress reported among the host sample in the present study. The economic changes that occurred around the time of data collection are likely to have impacted on Irish students' wellbeing. In 2009, Ireland was in the midst of an economic recession which was accompanied by a sharp decline in employment rates and increase in emigration. For example, data published by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) revealed that in 2009, for the first time since 1995, more people left Ireland than moved there.

Finally, while results from this study revealed that American students reported relatively low levels of discrimination in Ireland, a small number of American international students had experienced some form of discrimination since arriving and found such experiences stressful. It is likely that these American students were subject, like many American citizens abroad, to shifting levels of anti-Americanism that are linked with politics and world events (Dolby, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012).

Practical Implications and Limitations

Although this study had manystrengths, there are a number of limitations which must be considered. In the first instance the majority of study abroad students in this study were undergraduate students whereas most long-term international students were studying at postgraduate level. Although this pattern also reflects the composition of international students in Ireland (Educational Ireland, 2012), it is possible that the significant differences observed between long-term and short-term international students were attributable to variations in stage of study. One further limitation is that this study was conducted at one HEI in Ireland. As institutional culture has been shown to have a strong impact on the learning culture of international and host students, research with students from a selection of HEIs may produce different findings (Campbell & Hourigan 2008). It also should be noted that effect sizes for some of the statistical analyses indicate that the magnitude of the differences between mean scores are small. Finally, participants were not asked about their reasons for studying abroad. It may have been the case that there were differences between students who self-selected to study abroad and those who were required to do so.

The results of this research have important implications for those involved with preparing American students for travelling abroad to study, as well as service providers in the institutions to which American students travel. Given that American international students were experiencing moderate levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties, service providers should consider organizing workshops focusing on differences in cultural practices with groups of American international students and host students planning to go on an exchange to the U.S. In addition to focusing on sociocultural challenges, these workshops might focus on differences in academic environments which would be helpful for study abroad students experiencing low levels of academic satisfaction. Yeh and Inose (2003) propose that skill-training workshops and cultural exchange groups foster a sense of community for international students. Such workshops might also provide American study abroad students with an additional source of instrumental social support through facilitating interaction between international and host students.

However, it is important to point out that O'Reilly (2011) found international students sometimes do not perceive any benefits from participating in such programs and feel host students do not engage sufficiently with these programs. This points to a need to adapt peer mentoring programs to make them more attractive for host students and to try to facilitate students' interactions in more fun and creative ways. Predeparture attempts by service providers to raise American international students' awareness about some of the sociocultural issues relevant to their host country such as differences in humor, accent and interaction styles among host national young adults would also be helpful.

At the receiving end, assumptions regarding the academic commitment of American study abroad students need to be reviewed. Specifically, any perception among teaching staff that study abroad students from the U.S. are likely to be less than committed to their studies should be addressed. Furthermore, teaching staff need to be informed about the types of international students taking their courses and made aware of any issues that are relevant to their teaching and assessment, such as addressing their concerns about expectations and standards. Given some international students in this study reported experiences of discrimination, a presentation to staff at the host institution on the normalization of anti-Americanism in recent years and the impact of perceived discrimination on the psychological adaptation of international students might be helpful. Similarly, outlining to American international students before their departure that, while discrimination is not widespread, they may interact with individuals who have negative perceptions about the U.S. and educating students about how to respond in such situations would be helpful.

Conclusion

It is likely that over the next few years, increasing numbers of American students will opt to spend some time abroad as an international student. Thus, it is important to have an understanding of American international students' adaptation experiences. This study shows that while there are some subtle differences within the international student population, many American students in both short and long-stay programs adjust well to student life in Ireland. However, it also shows that some American students experience some challenges and that there are a number of practical ways in which educators can address these challenges in order to facilitate American students' cross-cultural adaptation.

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