

Students' Perception on the Effect of Participating in a Study Abroad Program On One's Multicultural and Professional Identity

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Abstract

Research shows that participating in various types of study abroad experiences may have an impact on student learning and awareness. Structured travel experiences that expose students to diverse cultures emphasize using international travel tend to produce individual awareness, change, and growth. This article explores two student's perceptions on the effect of participating in a study abroad program on their multicultural and professional identity.

Introduction

Short-term study abroad experiences are the most common type of study abroad programs in the United States. According to the Institute of International Education's 2008 Open Doors report, more than half of all American students who studied abroad in the 2006-07 academic year (55.4 percent) participated in short-term programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Short-term programs can range from weeklong programs in conjunction with a single course, to three- or four-week programs conducted during terms or in the summer, to longer programs of up to eight weeks that can involve homestays, travel to multiple sites, and service or research experiences (Donnelly-Smith).

Background

In May of 2009, the University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB) Counselor Education Program, in conjunction with Old Dominion University's Counseling and Human Services Department offered a two-week study abroad program in Italy. Participating counselor education students were enrolled in three hours of elective credit entitled, "A Counselor's View of Italy." The goal of this course was to provide students with an understanding of the role culture plays in counseling, with a specific focus on the counseling profession within Italy. Faculty members of this program agreed students would get the most out of this type of program if it was highly structured, require ongoing reflection, and included in-depth experience working or studying with host country participants.

The following learning objectives were developed to address the goal of the course:

1. To develop an understanding of the culture and people of Italy that have had an impact on the development of the counseling profession;
2. To develop an awareness of the state of development of the counseling profession in Italy in comparison with the development of the counseling profession in the United States;
3. To interact with Italian counselors and other mental health professionals to understand how counseling is provided to Italian clients;
4. To learn about social and political issues in Italy that are having an impact on the development of the counseling profession;
5. To learn about professionalization activities in Italy including the establishment of a national certification board, efforts to get counseling recognized by the Italian government, and the creation of jobs for counselors in Italy (Author, 2010).

During the two-week institute, participating students attended 30 hours of classroom instruction related to counseling in Italy, and special topics in counseling including areas such as legal issues in counseling, play therapy, cinema-therapy, social justice, and diversity issues in counseling. After each lesson, students were required to write a reaction to the content, relating the content to one or more multicultural principles as discussed in the course text.

According to Donnelly-Smith (2009), students have fewer authentic experiences when they spend much of their time travelling around. Spending the entire program in one locale can allow students to interact more authentically with host country residents, whether in the classroom, in service programs, or in short-term homestays. Donnelly-Smith also believes universities and colleges should also strive to offer all or at least most of their short-term programs internally, rather than relying on external service providers, many of which offer academically weak programs that are more focused on tourism.

Participants in this program spent the majority of their time in Reggello, Italy at a retreat center named *Casa Cares*. At *Casa Cares*, students ate, slept, and attended most of the 30 hours of instruction. Students also traveled to Florence to visit with mental health professionals at a mental health center and a “half-way” house. During these interactions, students attended a session with art and play therapists. Additionally while in Florence, students met with juvenile judicial authorities to learn about how mental health services were provided to juveniles who were involved in the court system. All other seminars led by Italian mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and public educators) were held at *Casa Cares*.

Two areas of discovery were continually presented to participating students: (a) one’s multicultural identity and (b) professional identity:

Multicultural Identity. Cultural awareness, sensitivity, knowledge and skills are necessary ingredients for counselor multicultural competence (Burnett, Hamel, Long, 2004). Furthermore, immersion into a diverse community can often help counseling students move beyond their acquired knowledge and help impact their multicultural identity. Additionally and as important, a lack of understanding of self in relation to others is a critical error that beginning counselors often make. Therefore, understanding the socio-cultural aspects of diverse communities is an important step on the road to counseling students acquiring multicultural competency (Burnett, Hamel, Long, 2004).

By creating an opportunity for immersion into the Italian culture, students from UAB were provided opportunities to gain multicultural counseling awareness, knowledge and skills with individuals from another culture. Throughout the two-week experience, students were provided opportunities to discuss their cultural beliefs and experiences with students from other universities. They also were provided numerous opportunities to confront and explore situations and dilemmas from culturally different perspectives. These experiences were accomplished through presentations by Italian and American counseling professionals, reading literature and listening to lectures on cultural identity and multicultural counseling theories and techniques. Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu (1997) support these activities believing that ongoing participation in group activities with individuals of other cultures allows students to become actively involved as participants in their own learning. As a result, students are able to enhance their learning and training by directly experiencing how diverse groups define and experience themselves. Burnett, Hamel, and Long (2004) believed the depth of a cultural exposure can transform students’ perceptions of others as well as in self-relation to others. This concept most directly identified the opportunity students had to examine and articulate their multicultural identity and awareness. Supporting this Kottler (1997), believed exposure to international populations through travel provides transformative learning experiences that influence and help change the lives of the participants.

Professional Identity. According to Gale and Austin (2003), the lack of a specific identity for professional counselors has many causes: counselors often receive training from different certifying, licensing, and accrediting bodies; counselors often belong to multiple professional organizations that may hold opposing views; counselors often acquire multiple certificates/credentials/licenses and believe they “owe” particular groups their allegiance; and counselors may be required to adhere to different and sometimes conflicting codes of ethics.

Weinrach (1987) found counseling's lack of identity understandable, proposing counseling's identity has always been confusing, even to those who have worked in the field for decades. Weinrach suggested counseling falls somewhere between education and psychology, citing that in counseling literature, theories and role models come from these two disciplines.

An important goal for new counselors to attain is not only to develop a strong professional identity, but to also be able to articulate what that identity looks like and how it manifests itself in one's professional life (Smith, 2001, Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Attaining a professional identity is a process not an end upon itself. Remley and Herlihy, further expanded on the acquisition of professional identity by stating, "developing a professional identity as a counselor includes understanding the history and development of counseling and related professions, knowing the professional roles and functions of counselors and how these are similar to and different from other professions, learning about and becoming involved in professional organizations, gaining awareness of counselor preparation standards and credentialing, and knowing how to advocate for your clients and your profession." (p. 3).

Examining one's professional identity also requires reflective effort through study and critical engagement with others. Questioning and examining the answers to these questions seem to be paramount to obtaining a professional identity. Remley and Herlihy (2010), postulated the following questions for novice counseling students:

1. Are you able to explain who you are as a member of a professional group?
2. Are you able to articulate what you believe? and
3. Are you able to explain how you are similar and different from other fro other health professionals?

Students who attended this study away program examined these questions along with areas pertaining to multicultural identity for two weeks while examining the counseling profession in Italy. Two UAB Counselor Education master's level students who attended the described study away program present the following narratives. Each student shares her view of the impact of participating in this program on her multicultural awareness and professional identity.

Insights Into My Multicultural and Professional Identity Derived from Participating in "A Counselor's View of Italy"

Lynn English

Multicultural Identity. Acclimating one's self to another world can be difficult, but also enlightening. As a result of spending two weeks in a foreign land, I felt I developed a greater empathy for those who, in America, are unfamiliar with our customs and our primary language. I noticed in restaurants, the menus were printed in Italian, with English translations beneath. This caused me to question how many restaurants here translate their menus for their non-English speaking patrons? I also observed in Italian conversations, most people seem to speak at once, whereas here, we try to speak one at a time. One culture's polite is another culture's rude? Culture is one aspect of an individual's personal identity, and when we, as a society, diminish a culture, we demean all individuals who identify with that culture. Italy has lost none of her charm, nor appeal, by being respectful of parts of culture that differ from the national norm; couldn't we, in the U.S., take it a step further, and not only show tolerance, but embrace whole-heartedly, all cultures different from us?

Since coming home, I have been more aware of "hidden people," those people whom our society deems insignificant or unimportant. Some of these groups have advocates, many do not. Our culture makes an effort to promote certain groups, but too many others remain hidden. Advocacy for all is what I see as the true meaning of multicultural awareness in counseling.

Professional Identity. Up until the time we left in May, my professional identity was "graduate student in counselor education." I saw myself as a *future* counselor, but I was still not ready to see myself "in the big chair." I wasn't sure exactly what this adventure was going to bring, but I felt I was ready to go wherever it

led me. What I gained from this adventure was a further development of my professional identity as defined through classes and networking.

Every other day, we participated in classes: both outside and inside of our villa and some in the city of Firenze (Florence). Many of these classes addressed counseling in Italy, but there were some that addressed professional issues in counseling here in the U.S. Seminars examining Counselor Wellness, Play Therapy, Spirituality and Religion in Counseling, and Cinema-therapy all opened doors and windows for me. These are not topics taught in our graduate classes, and although we have touched on some of these topics in professional development seminars, during our time in Italy they were presented in a more thorough manner. I was also exposed to students and professors from other universities. We discussed our respective programs, the similarities (primarily due to accreditation by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs), and the differences between programs (difference between how courses are presented and taught; and how some programs require students to complete the practicum portion of clinical training before taking their comprehensive exam, while others require students to pass their comprehensive exam before any clinical training can be taken). We also discussed our own, and each other's, future professional plans after graduation. The professors were also intriguing, and interesting to engage in conversation outside of the classroom experience. It was a great experience to see them in a relaxed atmosphere and to hear their perspectives on our profession, which to me made them all the more admirable and approachable. These other students and professors are future professional peers, resources and contacts with whom I can communicate.

BrieAnna Gesinski

Multicultural Identity. My overall intentions for this study abroad experience focused on my interest in learning about Italians' cultural viewpoint of counseling. Specifically, I wanted to learn how religion accompanied the peoples' support systems to cope with everyday life and stressors. Upon my arrival and quick integration into the Italian lifestyle, I formed some beliefs and assumptions based upon my observations. I believe Roman Catholicism plays a large role in the formation and support of one's identity within the Italian culture. Roman Catholicism is a pillar of strength in which a large majority of the culture looks to for guidance, advice and support in all aspects of living. With this, I believe counseling in Italy is in the beginning stages of development due to peoples' misunderstanding of the intended purpose of professional counselors. At the present time, many individuals rely upon their priests to play the role of counselor. They turn to their faith for support in times of need and look to their priests as the sole support system outside of their families. This may be well intended; however, I believe there may be times when a priest may provide a religiously biased view of a decision with which an individual is struggling. In order for clients to make the best decision for themselves, they need to feel supported and understood by their counselor without being judged. Because of the different moral and political issues that often arise with a client, counselors need to be aware of their biases and prepared to leave their personal beliefs out of their clients' counseling sessions. As the counseling profession continues to grow and develop in Italy, I believe professional organizations must work together to establish boundaries and standards for counselors in Italy. Religion can be used as a tool for guidance and support in a client's choices as long as the client feels comfortable and congruent with this decision and not forced to do so because of his or her counselor's personal viewpoint.

Professional Identity. While in Italy, I had the opportunity to reflect and grow personally as well as a professional school counselor. I gained perspective into what makes my own life "whole" and how to work towards complete integration of my counseling style into all aspects of my life. Authenticity is an important aspect of developing a trusting relationship with one's clients. Being congruent as a counselor in my personal and professional life will help to lay the groundwork for being an effective school counselor.

My Italian experience helped me recognize that when at home, I allow myself to be caught up in the "rat race" of success. I often forget to slow down and listen to my own body and take care of myself both physically and emotionally. This has not only de-sensitized me to my own emotions and reactions to others, but has quickly begun to erode my personal well-being.

I realized how important it is to set aside time each week for personal rejuvenation and self-reflection. For me, nature and quiet time provide reflection and self-growth for my often weary and worn out body and mind. In order to be a fully effective counselor, I must be in tune to my own needs and be willing to take time to take care of myself. To extend myself fully in assisting my students, I must be open to examining my personal life, responsibilities, decisions and emotions. As a school counselor, I will need to be alert and prepared to advocate for children in circumstances they may have little or no control over. In order to do this with a clear and conscious mind, I must take care of my personal expectations and emotions and recognize when they may be interfering with a decision regarding my students. The development of my professional identity must be a continuous and ever-evolving process. As I grow into the counseling profession, times and standards will change. With these changes comes the responsibility that is both ethical and professional; I, too, must continue to examine my belief system, learn about new counseling ideas and adapt to the changes within the counseling profession.

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