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Personal Adjustment, Language Acquisition and Culture Learning In Short-term Cultural Immersion

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ABSTRACT

This study describes how length of stay in a foreign country influenced personal adjustment, language acquisition, and culture learning among a convenience sample of 150 United States student volunteers participating in a short-term cross-cultural living/learning situation in Mexico. Short-term was defined as two, four; six, eight, or ten weeks. Five instruments measured anxiety and discomfort, expectations of cultural difference, changes in group membership, personal health, and language placement over the five time periods. Improvements occurred in personal adjustment, language acquisition, and culture learning for all learners regardless of length of stay, supporting short- term immersion as a viable strategy for culture and language learning.

Most health professionals are unprepared to face the challenge of a global society. The majority do not have the tools to work with culturally diverse populations. While international and multicultural study is an integral part of liberal higher education. students in the health professions have typically not participated due to educational program demands. Increasingly, however. students from the health professions are recognizing the importance of international experiences as a mechanism for learning language and acquiring cultural interaction skills and are participating in study abroad programs (Duffy. et al., 1998). These programs tend to be short-term rather than one or two semesters in length because of the curricular constraints inherent in health professional educational programs. Similarly. professionals already in the health care workforce are participating in programs to acquire needed skills to become more culturally competent (Jones, Bond & Mancini. 1998).

For the last eight years. we have used a modified field study approach to assist graduate and undergraduate nursing students as well as health care professionals to begin or to continue to study the Spanish language and learn the Mexican culture. Both use the same model: short-term immersion in the culture by living with a Mexican family and six hours of formal language study daily. The student program. a two week immersion experience. is part of a five week summer elective offered in the School of Nursing. As of July. 1999. 125 students have participated. The continuing education program, the Travel Study Learn Program, is a one week immersion

experience offered twice a year. Seventy-six health professionals have participated during the past three year period.

Despite the growing popularity of such immersion experiences, there is little evidence that those of short duration. less than a semester, are viable strategies to learn culture and language. Or, as is commonly believed, does the individual learner spend the majority of time adjusting to "culture shock," dealing with what Oberg (l960) describes as "the many frustrations and anxieties that are encountered in the initial stages of a cross-cultural experience," at the expense of culture and language learning? Although believed to be universal (Norris & Norris, 1993), little is known about "culture shock" in short term cultural immersion as the majority of previous research has been conducted with sojourners living or studying in a culture for extended periods of time. To determine if short-term immersion contributes to cultural learning, we engaged in a descriptive study of personal adjustment, language acquisition, and culture learning as reported by students from a variety of majors engaged in international study for varying lengths of time: two, four, six. eight or ten weeks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Culture is learned behavior and includes shared customs. beliefs and attitudes as well as products of human activity characteristic of a particular society or population (Linton, 1945). When an individual leaves the familiar world view of his own culture, confusion and frustration occur. Culture shock ema- nates from the distress experienced when all familiar signs and symbols of social interaction are missing. The experience of culture shock is characterized by stress due to the required adaptations, a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation, perception of rejection by members of the new culture, role con- fusion. anxiety, disgust and indignation, and feelings of impotence (Oberg, 1960; Norris & Norris, 1993).

Cross-cultural experiences of sojourners have been studied using socio- logical, psychological, and psychiatric perspectives (Church, 1982; Furnham, I987; Bochner,1982) and the concept of culture shock has been presented in diverse models. According to Arensberg and Niehoff ([964), the medical model of culture shock sees the phenomenon as a type of malady versus the more extreme view of culture shock as a mental illness (Foster quoted in Adler, l975). Bock (1970) attributed the inability of the individual to under- stand, control, and predict the behavior of others to the emotional reaction which he equates to culture shock.

In contrast to the medical model. the culture-learner model suggests that Sojourners do not experience an illness, but struggle to learn new behavior and expectations and gain skills required for effective adaptation in the new culture. Coping difficulties result from lack of appropriate social interaction skills. Culture shock decreases the learner's energy and productivity and may affect the individual's ability to acquire the needed skills of language and cultural understanding to negotiate the new culture. According to the model when the individual acquires the necessary skills. adaptation and effective intercultural communication occur (Bochner,1982).

Length of time in the cultural immersion experience is a major variable in the adaptation process and has been described by the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and W-curve (Gullahorn &

Gullahorn, 1963) theories. The U-Shaped Adjustment curve described by Lysgaard proposes that the individual's transition experience follows a "U-shaped trajectory of emotional well-being" (Nolan 1985, p. 19). Four stages characterize the experience of sojourners from honeymoon to adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955). The transition period be- gins with a "honeymoon phase" characterized by excitement and euphoria and a desire to learn more about the people and their customs.

This initial phase is followed by the growing awareness of real differences. values and expectations, and has been described as a period of disenchantment accompanied by symptoms of [culture] shock. Loneliness. anxiety. frustration, and feelings of inadequacy may be expressed in a variety of ways through depression, withdrawal or eruptions of anger (Brink & Saunders, 1976). Desire to return to the home country may be intense.

According to the U-Shaped Adjustment curve. a period of resolution and recovery follow and is characterized by acquisition of new social skills and behaviors appropriate to the host country. This culture-learning, however, is more than "learning one's lines" and is accompanied by personal growth and change. It involves a kind of reorganization of the individual's world view (Nolan. 1990). The accompanying acquisition of necessary skills leads to adaptation and effective intercultural communication. The W-curve theory extends the U-curve to include a re-acculturation experience when the individual returns home.

Church (l982) in an extensive review of the literature argues that support for the U-curve theory has been inconsistent and points out that most studies have been cross-sectional. Few studies have tested the hypothesis longitudinally to determine which characteristics of the sojourner interact with the culture to produce patterns of adjustment. No studies were found which examined the short term immersion experience. However, anecdotal evidence gathered from faculty observation indicate that the culture shock phenomenon occurs in varying degrees among students and plays a role in their ability to focus on educational goals or objectives (Bond & Jones, 1994).

The theory of culture shock has been critiqued as simplistic. non-specific, and lacking in implications for remedial action (Furnham and Bochner, 1982, p. 17 l). Bochner, Lin and McLeod (1980) contend that an inherent difficulty of the U-curve is the attempt to characterize intrapsychic adjustment. Adjustment is defined as the acquisition, over time, of behaviors, skills, and norms appropriate to the host culture. The authors re-define culture shock to mean a culture learner model. The sojourner moves from observer to participant and, in order to cope, must learn social skills of a new society. This model suggests that culture shock occurs in the domain of social encounters, social situations, social episodes, or social transactions between sojourners and hosts and requires the development of specific, teachable skills in order for the individual to adapt.

Communication is integral to the culture learner model as appropriate and effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills are necessary for effective cross-cultural encounters (Argyle, I982; Bochner, 1982). Rubin (1976) defined relevant components of cross-cultural behavior competence as respect, interactive posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behavior, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity. In a later study

using these behaviors to determine whether communication behaviors predicted cultural adaptation, Rubin and Kealey (1979) defined cultural adaptation as including culture shock, psychological adjustment. and interactional effectiveness. They concluded that persons most aware of their own values and perceptions experienced the most intense culture shock. Adjustment was highly correlated with ability to display respect. Taft (1977) defined four major aspects of the adaptation process including the acquisition of competence in culturally appropriate behavior and culturally defined roles and attitudes.

A number of additional variables have been identified as part of the adaptation process. Furnham and Bochner (1982) believe the quality, quantity, and duration of culture shock to be dependent upon the extent of differences between the host culture and the sojourner, individual differences (coping differences, personality, and demographic differences) and the quality of the experiences the sojourner has within the host country. Additional variables linked to successful culture learning include expectations of the sojourner (Weissman and Furnham, 1987) and social networks of the sojourner (Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977). Physical health and psychosomatic complaints have been identified as measures of adjustment in a number of studies (Baty & Dold, 1977).

In summary, it is recognized that culture shock exists, is multivariate, and is part of the phenomenon associated with culture learning. Merta et al. (1988) conclude that social scientists have yet to agree on a definition. A number of variables appear to influence the adjustment or adaptation process including the ability to communicate adequately which involves language acquisition, physical health as well as anxiety and discomfort, the ability to make friends in the host culture, and expectations of the learner in relation to cultural differences. There has been no reported study of culture shock and learning as rt of short-term immersion learning experiences.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to describe how length of stay in a foreign country influenced personal adjustment of learners (anxiety and discomfort and personal health), acquisition of language skills, and culture learning (expectations of culture difference and whether participants make Mexican friends). Length of stay was defined as two, four, six, eight or ten weeks. We were also interested in whether personal variables such as age, income, education, previous travel in the country. and previous language study made a difference in personal adjustment. language, and culture learning.

METHODS

A descriptive design was used to study the experience of personal adjustment, language acquisition, and culture learning among participants in a short- term cross-cultural living and learning experience. During a nine month period, data were collected using a variety of assessment tools from a non- probability, self-selected sample of 150 US student volunteers attending the Center for Bilingual and Multicultural Studies in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. Subjects were participating in a language and culture study program for either two, four, six, eight, or ten week periods. The Center provides intensive small group language instruction for

six hours daily. The majority of students live with a Mexican family for the duration of their immersion experience. Volunteers were recruited for study participation in English by a bilingual registered nurse during the formal orientation period on the first day of Center activities. Prior to participation, approval from the Institutional Review Board and informed consent were obtained. Participants were re- warded for completing the questionnaires with McDonald's food coupons and frisbees.

MEASUREMENT TOOLS

Five measures were administered. In addition, participants completed a demographic inventory requesting personal information about age, gender. race, education. profession, income range, previous Spanish language study. previous travel in Mexico, and living arrangements while in Mexico.

At the beginning of the immersion experience (Day 1 of Orientation to the Center), participants completed the demographic inventory, the Social Situations Questionnaire, the Expectations Questionnaire, and answered a self-assessment of personal health question. A language proficiency exam was administered by the language school on Day 1 during orientation to the school. Midway through the immersion experience, participants completed the Social Situations Questionnaire, the Best Friends Check List. and answered a self-assessment of personal health question. On the last day prior to departure from the Center. participants completed the Social Situations Questionnaire. the Expectations Questionnaire, the Best Friends Check List. and answered a self-assessment of personal health question. Language proficiency was assessed by faculty in the Center for Multicultural Studies during the last week of study.

Instruments to measure personal adjustment included a Social Situations Questionnaire (Furnham & Bochner, 1982) and a self-assessment of personal health question. The Social Situations Questionnaire was adapted by the re- searchers for use in the Mexican culture by changing the reference country to Mexico. Forty items described commonly occurring social situations which potentially could cause anxiety and discomfort. Subjects responded on a six point scale of perceived difficulty in negotiating these situations. Statements included "Making Mexican friends of your own age," "Going on public trans- port." "Going to a small private party with Mexican people." The higher the score the higher the discomfort or anxiety. No reliability of this scale was reported in the literature. Reliability analysis on pre, mid, and post administrations of the Social Situations Questionnaire to subjects in this study yielded alphas of .88, .90, and .93 respectively.

In order to determine the learner's health status each participant was asked to respond to the statement "Please rate your overall health status today: l=excellent, 2=good, 3=fair. 4=poor" at pre, mid, and post immersion experiences.

Language proficiency was determined by retrieving data from the language school's existing database on actual language placement at the beginning of the immersion experience and at the end of the immersion experience for each study participant. Placement at this school is determined by the school's paper and pencil test and teacher interviews with movement along a continuum in "steps" within the categories of beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

Two measures were used to determine whether culture learning occurred. An Expectations Questionnaire (Weissman and Furnham, 1987). modified for use in the Mexican culture by the researchers by changing the reference country from England to Mexico, examined expectations of cultural difference using forty, forced choice dichotomous questions about a range of topics or problems that sojourners typically encounter. The questions included, “Do you expect the cost of living to be higher than at home?" A low score reflected higher expectations of cultural difference. No reliability of the scale was reported in the literature. Reliability analysis on pre and post administrations of the modified Expectations Questionnaire in this study yielded alphas of .60 and .59 respectively.

A second measure to determine whether culture learning occurred. the Best Friends Check List, adapted from Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) describes Personal Adjustment, Language Acquisition and Culture Learning group membership. Participants were asked to identify their three best friends during their stay in Mexico. Additional questions allowed the participant to describe the age, sex, nationality, residence, and occupation of each “best friend." No reliability for the measure was reported in the literature.

DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The major questions regarding the effects of short term immersion were evaluated using repeated measures analysis of variance. Significant interaction effects, if observed. support the notion that differences in the dependent variable are influenced differently by length of stay. Significant *within subjects* effects, if observed, suggest that subjects changed over time in a significant way.

LIMITATIONS

The methodological limitations of this study we recognized were the reliance on self-assessment measures of health and the lack of reliability of the Best Friends Check List. Generalizability of the findings from this study was also limited to student sojourners to one country, Mexico. The subjects were not randomized but were a self-selected convenience sample. In addition, it was not possible to control for variables such as previous experiences with foreign travel, previous study of the Mexican culture. and differing motivations for participating in the immersion experience.

FINDINGS

Sample Characteristics

The majority of participants (75%) were college students; four percent were graduate students and fourteen percent were college graduates. Sixty- four percent were female and 36% were male. Ages ranged from intervals of sixteen to eighteen years to over 60 years with the majority (61%) being in the age range 19 to 25 years; 21% were 31 to 50 years of age. The majority of participants were white (91%); five percent represented other cultural groups including Black, Hispanic. and Asian. Annual income reported by the majority of participants (66%) was less than $10,000. The majority (79%) listed their profession as student while

approximately seven percent were in business or engineering, and four percent were from the health professions including social workers. psychologists. nurses and therapists. Eighty percent reported previous study of the Spanish language and 47% had previously traveled in Mexico.

For analysis, the eight age categories were collapsed into three categories: 21 years or less, 22-40. and 41 years and over. Each group had similar distributions of males and females. Age. income, and education of participants varied by length of stay. Those individuals who studied for two weeks were older with significantly more participants over 40 years of age. Those who studied for ten weeks represented the youngest cohort with significantly more participants in the 21 years or less age group (Chi Square = 44.371, df=8; p=.000). The two week subjects had relatively higher incomes (>$50,000) (Chi Square=35.ll6; df=8: p=.000), and were more likely to hold college degrees than participants in the other groups (Chi Square = 33.648; df=4; p=.000).

Previous Spanish language study was not related to weeks of stay (Chi Square = 6.577; df=4; p=.160). The relationship between weeks of study and previous travel in Mexico was statistically significant with two week participants more likely to have traveled previously in Mexico (Chi Square=l9.839; df=4; p=.00l).

Personal Adjustment

Participant responses on two measures, the Social Situations Questionnaire and the self-assessment of personal health, were analyzed by length of stay to describe personal adjustment of the sojourners to the immersion experience. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each length of stay for each measurement period for the Social Situations Questionnaire.

Table 1

Social Situations as a Measure of Anxiety & Discomfort by Weeks of Stay

Mean Scores by weeks of stay	Pre	Mid	Post
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
2 weeks	102 (18)	97 (17)	94 (14)
4 weeks	109 (13)	100(12)	98 (15)
6 weeks	102 (16)	92 (16)	93 (14)
8 weeks	101 (13)	94 (12)	91 (19)
10 weeks	109 (14)	101(14)	98 (14)

There were no significant interaction effects but scores on the Social Situations Questionnaire declined significantly over time (F =78; df = l. 144; p<.00). These effects (2 = .35) were present regardless of duration of stay. Thus. regardless of length of stay, subjects became more comfortable with the Mexican culture.

Age and income were related to anxiety and discomfort. Those subjects who were younger (dl years) had greater anxiety and discomfort at the beginning of the immersion experience

(Kendall's = -.191, p=.002). Subjects with less income also had higher levels of anxiety and discomfort (Kendall's = -.221, p=.00l).

Table 2 describes the means and standard deviations for each measurement period for pre. mid and post scores on perceived health. A score of 1=excellent and 4=poor. Analysis revealed no significant change in subjects' self-assessment of health over measurement times. There were no significant within subject effects or interaction effects.

Table 2

Perceived Health Status Rating

Weeks of Stay	Pre	Mid	Post
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
2 weeks	1.32 (0.57)	1.27 (0.55)	1.32 (0.57)
4 weeks	2.00 (0.83)	1.83 (0.64)	l.87 (0.80)
6 weeks	l.74 (0.69)	1.78 (0.85)	l.83 (0.65)
8 weeks	l.55 (0.60)	1.82 (0.91)	l.64 (0.58)
10 weeks	l.70 (0.60)	1.60 (0.72)	l.87 (0.82)

Language Acquisition

There were 108 (72%) subjects with data on language placement at the beginning and end of the immersion experience. Table 3 describes the means and standard deviations. A one between (duration of visit), one within (measurement time) repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on language proficiency (F=22; df = 4. 102', p=.00. This effect was moderate (2=.47). There was also a significant within subjects effect (F=299', df=l,l02; p=.00) that was large (2=.75). These results indicate that language proficiency improved for each length of stay but improved more with longer stays.

Table 3

Language Placement

Mean Scores by Weeks of Stay	Pre	Post	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
2 weeks	111.19 (-0.179)	111.24	(.165)
4 weeks	111.26 (0.161)	111.33	(.155)
6 weeks	111.29 (0.128)	111.44	(0.008)
8 weeks	111.11 (0.003)	111.37	(.007)
10 weeks	111.27 (0.150)	111.46	(.137)

Culture Learning

Subjects responses on two measures. the Expectations Questionnaire which describes perceptions of cultural difference, and the Best Friends Check List were analyzed by length of stay to describe culture learning. Table 4 presents the mean scores and standard deviations on the

Expectations Questionnaire at the pre and post measurement periods for each length of stay.

Table 4

Expectations of cultural Differences by Weeks of Stay Expectations Questionnaire

Means Scores by Weeks of Stay	Pre	Post
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
2 weeks	14.3 (2.82)	15.9 (2.47)
4 weeks	3.8 (2.65)	16.5 (2.66)
6 weeks	13.2 (2.94)	16.2 (2.95)
8 weeks	14.6 (2.87)	15.7 (2.24}
10 weeks	12.3 (2.77)	14.2 (3.16)

Analysis revealed significant within subject effects with decreased expectations of cultural difference regardless of length of stay (Wilks' = .59, F (1) = 55-31. p=.000, multivariate 2 = .32. Within subjects contrasts indicated a significant linear effect with means increasing regardless of time in the immersion experience (F=66.8l, df=1, p=.000). There were no significant between subject effects or interaction effects. Age and income were correlated with differences in expectations of cultural difference at the beginning of the immersion experience. Those subjects who were younger had greater expectations of cultural difference (Kendall's =.146; p =.02 1). Those subjects with less income also had higher expectations of cultural difference (Kendall's =.232; p=.001). The association between lower income and higher expectations of cultural difference was also found at the end of the immersion experience (Kendall's =.l47; p =.03).

Changes in group membership were measured by the Best Friends Check List which asked subjects to identify their three best friends during their stay in Mexico by age, sex. nationality. residence, and occupation. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Changes in Number of Mexican Friends for All Measurement Periods for All Lengths of Stay

CHANGE*	
Lost two Mexican Friends	4
Lost one Mexican Friend	16
No change	93
Gained one Mexican friend	16
Gained two Mexican friends	3
No response	18

** Chi Square = 87.653; df = 9; p = .000*

Best friends tended to be 26 years of age or less, female, from the United States, a student, and living with the host family. Only the actual number of Mexicans mentioned by the subjects

was analyzed. There were no differences between groups with varying lengths of stay and the number of Mexican friends (ANOVA, F=1.167; df=4; p=.533). However, when the number of Mexican friends was examined for the aggregate, regardless of length of stay, the number of Mexican friends identified by the participants decreased over the three measurement periods (Chi Square = 87.653; df=9; p=.000) (Table 6). The number of Mexican friends was also not associated with age. income, education or profession of the participants.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary. this study found that improvements occur in personal adjustment, language acquisition. and culture learning in short-term immersion. Participants with differing lengths of stay showed similar patterns in each of the areas. Subjects entered the immersion experience reporting relatively high levels of anxiety and discomfort which decreased regardless of length of stay. The majority of participants in the sample reported a remarkable stability in their view of their health with excellent to good health as a pattern. Length of time in the culture did not appear to influence perception of health. Each group made language progress regardless of length of stay. Those individuals who stayed longer made the most language progress. Subjects made relatively few Mexican friends and began the immersion experience with relatively high levels of expectations of cultural difference which also decreased over time regardless of length of stay. These findings support short-term language and cultural immersion experiences. as experienced by participants in this language school. as a viable strategy for educational goal attainment relative to culture and language learning.

DISCUSSION

Sufficient literature as well as anecdotal evidence support the contention that sojourners experience adjustment difficulty when confronted with living in a new culture. However. based on findings from this study. a culture learner model rather than a model of culture shock may be a more appropriate frame- work for understanding the effects on educational outcomes. It appears that immersion in a culture may not inhibit adaptation to a new culture in ways which prevent the attainment of educational goals including language acquisition and appreciation of cultural differences and similarities.

This study used a variety of quantitative tools from previous studies, a reflection of the approach used by most studies of culture shock and learning. Clearly. better objective measurement tools are needed. However, qualitative investigations may provide additional insights into the adjustment process. The description of "lived experiences” and their meaning allows participants and researchers to explore abstract phenomena. A particular area for future study is the post immersion experience relative to culture learning. Is the individual able to transfer the language and culture learning to the home environment? In addition, examination of the adjustment phenomenon on a bi-weekly basis for individuals who stay six. eight and ten weeks may provide better insight into the adaptation process. Further study of the personal

characteristics of the sojourner and their interaction with culture to produce patterns of adjustment would provide new insights into the cultural shock phenomena as it relates to culture learning. An understanding of the individual's tolerance for ambiguity, developmental stage, communication patterns, coping skills. and the quality and length of the immersion experience need to be explored.

Finally, findings from this study have particular relevance for the health professions. Universities preparing health care professionals and health care systems are under intense pressure to develop a culturally competent health workforce to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse patient population. Despite the rhetoric on the need for increased knowledge about cultures and the explosion of programs promoting cultural understanding, there have been few examples of effective teaching-learning strategies and little to no study of the outcomes of these endeavors. Anthropologists have long advocated immersion in the culture. for periods of at least a year, as the best mechanism for studying culture, believing it allows the individual to move from observer to participant (Goodenough, 1970). Immersion allows the learner to become aware of “our own ethnocentrism" (Johnson. 1978). While this study examined students from a variety of majors. findings suggest short-term immersion is a viable strategy for assisting the student studying in the health professions as well as professionals already in the workforce. It is a strategy which deserves continued study if we are to actualize our goals for the development of a culturally competent health workforce.

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