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Moving in, moving through, and moving out : applying Schlossberg's transition theory and the influence of culture shock in study abroad experiences

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Abstract

The experience of studying abroad is a period of transition for a college student. The impact of this transition on a student's life can be explored through the application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the experience, and more specifically, how the resources available affect the student while in a new culture. The application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the study abroad experience of college students can have implications for those working with students going to and returning from study abroad experiences, and it can also provide a framework for advisors preparing orientation and reentry sessions.

MOVING IN, MOVING THROUGH, AND MOVING OUT:
APPLYING SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION THEORY AND THE INFLUENCE OF
CULTURE SHOCK IN STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

The experience of studying abroad is a period of transition for a college student. The impact of this transition on a student's life can be explored through the application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the experience, and more specifically, how the resources available affect the student while in a new culture. The application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the study abroad experience of college students can have implications for those working with students going to and returning from study abroad experiences, and it can also provide a framework for advisors preparing orientation and reentry sessions.

Although Schlossberg's theory is an adult transition theory, Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito (1998) consider the theory to be relevant to traditionally aged college students as well. According to Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), transitions are more important than chronological age for understanding and evaluating an individual's behavior. Transition theorists are interested in an individual's resources for coping. Although transitions differ, Schlossberg, et al. state that "the structure for understanding individuals in transition is stable" (p. 26). The three major parts of the transition process include approaching the transition, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge.

Schlossberg (1995, p. 27) defined a transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." The role of perception is important as an individual goes through the transition stages, and this will help to determine the type, context, and impact of the transition. Essentially, most study abroad experiences can be defined in type as an anticipated transition—through study abroad orientation sessions, and preparation on behalf of the student, the student expects the event to occur and can plan accordingly. The student can also determine the context of the transition, in that he or she determines the location

of the experience, as well as the timing of the experience during the academic career. Impact is determined by the degree to which a transition alters one's daily life. The impact of a study abroad experience can largely be determined by the factors that help a student adjust to studying overseas.

Schlossberg identified four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, known as the four S's (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The ability of students to cope with a transition such as a study abroad experience will depend upon their resources in each of these four areas. It is the role of the study abroad advisor to help the student to have the optimal amount of resources in order to help the student transition smoothly into a new culture.

The role of culture shock will also determine a student's ease of adjustment and heavily influences a student's transition to a new culture. Culture shock can change an individual's perception of a transition. It can be defined as "the idea that entering a new culture is potentially a confusing and disorienting experience" (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 12; as cited in Comp, 2000). Symptoms of culture shock can range from mild emotional disorders and stress related psychological ailments to psychosis (Weaver, 1993). In returning to their home culture, students can also go through reverse culture shock. It is important for the study abroad advisor to help the student recognize the symptoms of culture shock and the effect culture shock can have upon his or her adjustment to a new culture.

In studying the application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the study abroad process, I will examine the adjustment process taken from a literature review of actual student experiences during the study abroad process. I will also review literature on culture shock and explore how culture shock can impact a student's adjustment to a new culture. The results of this

research will be useful for study abroad advisers in recognizing the factors that affect a student's transition, leading to more effective pre-departure and re-entry programming, as well as other student affairs personnel working with departing and returned study abroad students on the campus in general.

Overview and Application of Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Although Schlossberg's Transition theory is typically categorized as a theory of adult development, it can also be useful for studying college student development. Transition theory was influenced by Schlossberg's previous work in adult development theory, which contains four categories of adult development—contextual perspective, developmental perspective, life span, perspective, and the transitional perspective (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In working with the adaptation of individuals to the environment, Schlossberg developed three sets of variables that affect how an individual will cope with transition. These three sets of variables include the individual's perception of the transition, characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition. In *Overwhelmed* (1989), Schlossberg introduced the 4 S's: situation, self, support, and strategies.

A transition exists only if defined as such by the individual experiencing it (Schlossberg, et al., 1995). If the individual does not attach significance to changes in his or her life, it may not be defined as a transition. Schlossberg identified three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. For the purpose of this discussion, studying abroad may be considered to be an anticipated transition; although unanticipated transitions may occur while a student is studying abroad. Context refers to one's relationship with the transition, while the impact of the transition upon the individual is measured by how much it affects the individual's daily life. While Schlossberg defines a transition as an event or nonevent, adjusting to the effects

of the transition is considered to be a process. The series of phases an individual moves through was described by Schlossberg et al. (1995) as "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out."

Schlossberg et al. (1995) observed that an individual's ability to cope with a transition is determined by two types of appraisals: primary and secondary. Primary appraisal pertains to the individual's view of the transition, as positive, negative, or irrelevant. A self-assessment of one's resources for coping determines the secondary appraisal. These two types of appraisal are subject to change while undertaking the transition process. Using Schlossberg's theory as a framework, each student can approach change with resources available for managing change. The four S's can be applied to student stories, as they go through the process of moving in, moving through, and moving out of their experiences abroad.

Situation

The first S is situation. There are several factors to consider while applying the situation factor to a transition. By taking stock of one's situation when evaluating the impact of a transition, it is important to take note of several factors. In *Counseling Adults in Transition* (1995), Schlossberg, et al., list certain characteristics of the transition to evaluate when exploring the transition, which include trigger, timing, control, role change, previous experience, duration, and concurrent stress. Each of these factors is essential to the study abroad experience; the whole purpose of the study abroad orientation, for example, is to help the student plan his or her trip. A student studying abroad chooses to study abroad as well as the timing of the trip, unless unforeseen circumstances prevent a student from studying abroad. A student may experience internal control, defined as a decision made by the individual, or external control, described as the transition being forced upon the individual, during her or his time abroad, depending upon the situation. Previous experience abroad, especially in the study abroad destination country,

will have a large impact on how the student adjusts in the present experience. A study abroad trip is most likely temporary, therefore easier to endure than a permanent change. What else is taking place in a student's life, and the amount of stress from these occurrences, will also affect the student's transition into the experience.

Most of the factors that fall under the category of situation can be determined before a student even embarks on his or her experience. A student's trigger for study abroad often involves a student's motivation for studying abroad. One motivation for students is often the acquisition of a foreign language (Story, 1998). Students are also pushed to go abroad by intellectual curiosity. Role models can also influence a student to go abroad. In one student's situation, a French graduate student influenced her to go abroad: "...there was a French graduate assistant here and she and I became friends, and so that kind of inspired me to go study abroad" (Story, 1998, p. 45). The timing of the student's study abroad experience can be determined by the necessity to fill a requirement, which can also motivate the student to go abroad. Travel in the past can serve as previous experience for students, and can motivate the student as well as be a predictor of a student's ability to adjust.

Role changes can also occur for the student. For the first time, a student may experience negative stereotypes. Except for rare occasions, a student is aware of the duration of his or her experience and can plan accordingly. Leaving one's homeland with a fear of the unknown can make a student feel a loss of control. This occurred with one student: "I was so scared. The first weekend I was just sick to my stomach" (Story, p. 54).

Self

The second S is self. The personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources are two categories of factors related to self (Schlossberg, et al., 1995). "An individual's

personal and demographic characteristics—socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, and stage of health—bear directly on how he/she perceives life" (p. 58). A Caucasian student studying abroad in Africa, for example, may feel as though he or she is in the minority for the first time. Students may also encounter stereotypes of Americans for the first time. "I have encountered a stereotypical view of Americans, which is unfair and unfortunate. By and large, the Europeans I've met think Americans are arrogant, materialistic, and elitist, and that our priorities are twisted" (Hannah, 2002). A non-traditional aged student may view their experience abroad much differently than a traditional aged student. These factors will determine how a student views the transition process. Psychological resources, also considered aids to coping, include ego-development; outlook or how they view life especially in regards to optimism and self-efficacy; and commitment and values.

Stress can also be caused by an individual's personal and demographic characteristics. Socioeconomic status, for example, can affect how much money a student can devote to his or her experience. "Students are often on a shoestring budget, and financial constraints can be a looming concern. Financial freedom, to a certain degree, provides students with options" (Story, 1998, p. 65). Concern over gender, especially safety as a female traveler, can also take place. One student reflected: "I wouldn't have worried too much except I was a woman and I was alone and I had a backpack. I looked like a prime target for these two gentlemen" (Story, p. 58).

In terms of the psychological category of the self, Comp (2000) found through his study that students reported an increased level of self-confidence after returning from abroad. For example, one student reported, "A few weeks ago it finally hit me that I could do anything I wanted to do...I'm at a stage in my life where no one would really be able to stop me if I really wanted to do something, no matter if it was good or bad (p. 47)." The outlook of students

studying abroad also changed, as nine of ten participants in Comp's study experienced a change in their appreciation for life.

Support

The third S, support, involves social support. It can include any of the following: affection, affirmation, assistance or aid, or feedback (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002).

According to Schlossberg and Chickering (p. 50), "people receive support from their intimate relationships, their family units, their larger network of friends, and their institutions through faculty, student personnel services professionals, peers, or administrators."

Social support for a student can change when a student goes abroad. Leaving family and friends behind can be one of the challenges for students going abroad, and a whole new network of social supports, formed of a host family and new friends, can be made abroad. One student reports: "My study abroad experience in the sunny beach town of La Serena, Chile, isn't only about navigating a new culture...It has become more about finding 'a system of support.' Talk to any other American student here and they will tell you the same. What you think is stable—what appears familiar—isn't. You feel rocked, unsure and confused. It is as though your ability to function in daily life forgot to get on the plane with you" (Jankowski, 2002).

A host family can be a very influential role in a student's experience abroad. Story (1998) states: "The expectations students and host families had of each other played a large part in the overall satisfaction—or discontent—with being abroad" (Story, p. 60). Also, seeking out a system of support from the citizens of the host culture can help with adjustment. One student was told by his father, "Please don't go to Italy and hang out with a bunch of American kids" (Hannah, 2002). This same student comments "It's not hard to make friends when you have so much to learn from each other." Another student reports, "although my foreign friends can

listen, they don't know the system like Chileans do. They cannot 'induct' me into Chilean culture. That is why foreigners seek out the company of Chilean friends, lovers, or families, which often provide intense and intimate support." (Jankowski, 2002).

Strategies

The final of the four S's, strategies, involves coping strategies used to manage stress during a transition. "Schlossberg et al. (1995) endorsed Pearlin and Schooler's description of three categories of strategies: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath" (Schlossberg, 1995; as cited in Evans, et al, 1998, p. 114). In order to cope with transitions, individuals may employ these four coping modes: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior.

"...I really think it is important if you work with international exchanges that you're really up with those students and saying, 'How's it going? How are you getting along?' I wasn't with any kind of an organization. Nobody sent me, I went myself. So it was much more difficult to know what to do in that situation (Story, 1998, p. 90)." Judging from the comments made by this student, the roles of the study abroad adviser and other student personnel in a student's study abroad experience are very important. These relationships can be part of the three types of strategies that modify the situation, control the meaning, and aid in managing the stress in the aftermath. Making friends with natives of the host country can also serve as a strategy to adjust. "I have made Spanish friends. There is nothing better than waffles with chocolate and whipped cream in the warmth of Spanish company..." commented Lindsay Freedman (2002), a student studying in Barcelona.

Having friends from the host culture can also help study abroad students adjust to the

academic component of a study abroad experience. Kazia Jankowski (2002), a student studying in Chile, found her art class to be difficult and frustrating after she came to class with a completely different assignment in appearance than the other members of the class. Her roommate in Chile was able to tell her the correct assignment. Jankowski soon found out that she didn't understand that education is not always about exploration and that the teacher is not always your guide. Navigating the academic system in a new culture is a challenging task for students, yet often a necessary tool of survival to be successful.

Transition Theory and Culture Shock

"I think the term 'culture shock' is a gigantic understatement, a phrase that cushions the reality of having your mind completely blown upon arriving in a foreign country" (Freedman, 2002). Heavily influencing a student's ability to cope with a transition is the experience of culture shock. As a student takes stock of his or her situation, self, support and strategies, these can each be affected by going through the experience of culture shock. Culture shock and reverse culture shock occur during the moving through and moving out phases of a study abroad experience. Knowledge of the symptoms of culture shock and a preparation for effectively dealing with these symptoms will serve as strategies to help the student cope with the culture shock experience. "Nothing can truly prepare you for being plunked down in the middle of a culture that you have only learned about second-hand. I was ready, I suppose for the big differences...but I was not prepared for the more insignificant differences to jar me so much; for me, the accumulation of these 'little things' was the hardest obstacle to my cultural adjustment" (Freedman 2002).

"Culture shock, defined as emotional reactions to the disorientation that occurs when one is immersed in an unfamiliar culture and is deprived of familiar cues, has been an organizing

psychological concept in intercultural relations since the term was originally coined by Cora DuBois in 1951 and popularized after Kal Oberg's 1953 speech in Brazil appeared in *Practical Anthology* in 1960 (Page, 1993, p. 2)." By understanding the process of adjustment, which includes acknowledging the process of the transition, a study abroad student can anticipate the stress of a study abroad experience and develop coping mechanisms to adjust to a new culture. Developing effective methods to cope with culture shock could be considered part of the strategies category of Schlossberg's theory.

It is important when discussing culture shock with students to refer to it as a part of a normal transitional experience, rather than referring to culture shock as a disease (Weaver, 1993). Rather than considering culture shock as something to avoid, students can consider strategies to make culture shock less stressful and turn it into a positive experience. It is important to help students develop coping strategies that facilitate adjustment.

According to the literature, there are three causal explanations for the occurrence of culture shock (Weaver, 1993). These include loss of familiar cues, breakdown of interpersonal communication, and an identity crisis. The first of these, loss of familiar cues, involves the transition into a culture without the presence of familiar cues and reinforcers. Both social and physical cues make us feel comfortable with our setting, and the loss of these familiarities can cause stress for an individual. For example, the nonverbal cues in conversation may vary significantly in the new host culture. "In a new social environment, behavior is no longer clearly right or wrong, but becomes very ambiguous (p. 140)." Adapting to a new environment can result in the acquisition of new skills and ways of looking at the world, although these results are not gained without the presence of pain and disorientation.

The second explanation of the occurrence of culture shock involves the breakdown of interpersonal communication (Weaver, 1993). "A basic assumption in this explanation is that a breakdown of communication, on both the conscious and unconscious levels, causes frustration and anxiety and is a source of alienation from others (p. 142)." The breakdown of communication in this explanation is seen as a natural part of living in a new culture, and the level of awareness of the individual to his or her own reactions will determine the individual's adaptation to the effects of culture shock.

The final explanation offered by Weaver for the causes of culture shock is identity crisis. This explanation implies that personal growth occurs as an individual successfully overcomes culture shock. Much as Schlossberg applies transition theory to an identity crisis, Weaver applies the concept of identity crisis to culture shock. As moving into a new culture provides new demands upon an individual, the individual becomes overwhelmed and must temporarily experience disorientation as he or she does not know what to pay attention to or how to solve problems (Weaver, 1993). Weaver compares this transitional period to other life crises such as adolescence. "As with any other identity crisis, culture shock allows us to give up an adequate perceptual and problem-solving system to be born. It is somewhat of a death-rebirth cycle (p. 145.).

Weaver (1993) lists several ways in which individuals can cope with cross-cultural adjustment stress. By understanding the process of adjustment, students can anticipate stress, and this can help minimize the severity of student reactions to the culture shock experience. It is also important to prepare the students with strategies to control the symptoms of culture shock. These include learning something about the new culture before leaving home and the development of skills that will facilitate cross-cultural understanding, communication, and

adaptation. By taking stock of one's self, situation, strategies, and support, a student can be prepared with a foundation for developing a set of coping strategies to manage culture shock.

"I adjusted well to life in Korea, but was unprepared for the emotions I had about American society when I came back," (Barg, 1999). Not only do students go through culture shock as they enter a new culture, they can also experience reverse culture shock as they make the transition back into their native culture. Students can be unprepared for this transition home; it is important that they are forewarned that reverse culture shock can occur. La Brack (1993) identifies two unique elements that influence the return home for those abroad: an idealized view of home, and an illusion that nothing will have changed while the student was away. "Many people report that the culture shock they faced upon returning to their own country was greater than the initial shock of adjusting to the other culture (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994)." A coping strategy to manage reverse culture shock is to help students develop a more realistic perspective of the concept of home. As students transition back into their home cultures, taking stock of the situation can help them to adjust to the culture from which they came.

Implications for Practitioners

Schlossberg's theory of transition and the influence of culture shock upon a student's adjustment into a new culture justify the importance of pre-departure orientation, as well as the importance of a support system on the home campus and the campus abroad. By assisting students in taking stock of the situation by evaluating the 4 S's, student personnel can help students to effectively use their resources to make the most of their study abroad experiences.

Effective study abroad orientations cover a wide variety of materials that will help a student prepare to study abroad. Topics can include health and safety abroad, culture shock, travel, academics, financial issues, and important documents. Orientation materials are often

placed online for easy accessibility. Examples of online information include Web sites such as the University of Iowa (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~uiabroad/>) and the University of Northern Iowa (<http://fp.uni.edu/studyabroad/>). Sharing sessions between returned study abroad students and those going in the future have also been effective. Study abroad advisors often find that students are more than eager to hear what the experience is "actually" like from students who have been there. While planning pre-departure programming, it is important to realize that students will be making a huge cultural adjustment and that by helping them take stock of the situation, they will be better prepared to make the cultural transition.

Perhaps most importantly, study abroad advisors, as well as general student affairs practitioners and faculty members, can all be a source of support for students abroad. Students that venture into new cultures completely on their own may be very reliant upon their advisors and staff as they make this transition. Not only is an awareness of the 4 S's and the influence of culture shock important for students; an awareness of the various components of transition theory, as well as the symptoms of culture shock, can help student affairs professionals to work with students abroad as well.

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