

Cultural Adaptation: Study Abroad in Swaziland



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Introduction

- Higher education must strive to prepare students to thrive in a global society (Longview Foundation, 2008)
- Study abroad programs globalize the undergraduate curricula (Zhai & Scheer, 2002)
- Agricultural study abroad should incorporate cultural learning (NRC, 2009)



Purpose

- To explore how College of Agricultural and Life Sciences students at the University of Florida reacted to the culture during a short-term study abroad program.



Methods

- African Savannah Wildlife Ecology
- 15 students
- 19 day program in Swaziland
- Case study
 - Grounded theory analysis
 - Open coding
 - Axial coding
 - Selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990)



Data Collection

- Pre-travel questions
- Post-experience questions
- Participant observation
- Reflective journaling
- Photographs/captions



Findings

- Eight stages and 20 sub-stages of cultural adaptation emerged:
 1. Initial feelings
 2. Cultural uncertainty
 3. Cultural negativity
 4. Cultural growth
 5. Cultural barriers
 6. Feelings throughout the program
 7. Academic and career development



Initial Feelings

- Initial Concerns
- Initial Excitement
 - “I’m very excited to experience a new culture and country” (5).
- Need for Personal Growth and Cultural Growth
 - “I think the culture in Swaziland will help bring me out of my American bubble and it will help me be aware that different cultures have different customs” (9).
 - Expects Culture Shock
 - “I believe it may be a bit of a cultural shock for me and I’m actually really excited about that” (14).



Cultural Uncertainty

- Comparisons
 - Friendliness and standard of living (1; 9; 13).
 - “It was hard for me to not look Swazis in the eye while talking to them because it is the complete opposite for our American culture” (9).
- Cultural Surprises
 - Traditional culture- clothes, ceremonies, and dances(4; 5; 7).



Cultural Negativity

- Frustration
 - Difficult to interpret body language (12)
 - Polygamist lifestyle (8)
 - Charitable organizations (1)



Cultural Barriers

- Language Barrier
 - Communication challenges (5; 13).
 - Participant 14 stated, “today I finally felt the awkwardness that comes with lack of a common language.”



Feelings Throughout the Program

- Excitement
 - Human interactions (2; 6)
 - “I’m excited to meet more Swazis, and learn about more of their culture” (6).
- Negative attitude towards the United States
 - Felt people in Swaziland were better than people from the United States (1; 7)
- Discomfort
 - Visiting villages (4)
 - Treatment of women (2)
 - Trash (2)
 - Bodily fluids (2)



Academic and Career Development

- Academic focus
 - Conducted wildlife research
 - Discussed poaching (6)
 - Conservation (2; 4)
- Professional growth
 - People influence wildlife conservation (6; 11)



Cultural Growth

- Overcoming language barriers
- Cultural respect and acceptance
 - “They are very traditional people that don’t seem to be open to changing to a “western” civilization, not that they should” (4).
 - Danced with Swazi women (8)
- Positive Cultural Experiences
 - Visiting Villages (2; 3; 4; 9)
 - Visiting markets (2)
 - Interaction with Swazi college students (6; 12)



Cultural Growth

- Cultural Identification and Recognition of culture
 - “Swazi people might be poor and the age of death is very low but they are very happy people with a real sense of community and family values” (4).
- Cultural learning
 - Purpose of children and food consumption (4; 10)
- Personal growth
 - Listening skills and appreciation for the U. S.
- Increased interest in future experiences abroad
 - “I love the warmth of the people and the beautiful mountains and I can’t wait to come back” (6).



Conclusions/Implications

- Unique experiences for each participant
- Cultural adaptation is non-linear
- Study abroad facilitators should help students adapt to the culture
- Academic and cultural learning
- Time for reflection
- Learning activities prior, during, and after
 - Language skills
 - Cultural Traditions
 - Cultural acceptance



Future Research

- Replication
- Depth and breadth of reflective journaling
- Instructor differences/program differences



Thank You!

