



International sojourn experience and personality development: Selection and socialization effects of studying abroad and the Big Five



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ABSTRACT

As part of a multi-study project, this test-retest study seeks to identify the relations between studying abroad and a sojourner's personality as measured by the Big Five personality traits. It thereby attempts to answer the questions of who chooses to study abroad and how study abroad changes personality. A total of 221 students from a German university were tracked over the course of a semester, with the Big Five being obtained via a German version of the Big Five Inventory (Lang, Lüdtke, & Asendorpf, 2001) both at the beginning and at the end. The share of 93 students who studied abroad were found to rate higher in agreeableness and openness prior to the international experience than their fellow students who did not sojourn. In turn, sojourning evoked increases in both extraversion and agreeableness and a decrease in neuroticism. Upon inclusion of interaction terms of initial Big Five levels and study abroad status, positive main effects of study abroad and negative interaction effects for both agreeableness and conscientiousness could be observed.

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1. Introduction

Consequences of expanding globalization and growing internationalization are noticeable in almost every aspect of life today and make no exception for the field of academic education. In the past decades, the amount of students with international sojourn experience has risen continually and there appears to be no end to this trend. Currently, about 37% of Germany's students enrolled in higher semesters have completed a study-related visit abroad. A total of 29% even spent at least three months abroad (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, 2015). Though study abroad programs seek to provide valuable academic experiences, students have indicated that their primary reasons for studying abroad were less related to gaining methodological and technical expertise but rather to experiencing personal development and growth (Heublein, Hutzsch, Schreiber, & Sommer, 2011).

As a result of this development, recent research has focused on psychological conditions and consequences of foreign exposure (Jokela, 2009; Ying, 2002). However, only few studies have specifically examined the ways and extent to which personality changes as a result of study-related international sojourn experiences (e.g., Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). The present study therefore seeks to further contribute to this debate by investigating the relation between studying abroad and the Big Five personality dimensions.

1.1. Stability and change in personality

For decades, personality researchers have classified personality traits as stable patterns, which characterize individuals in a distinguishing way. The well-established Five Factor model (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) is widely accepted for its high reliability and temporal stability (McCrae & Costa, 2008). However, in recent years, more and more longitudinal studies have shown that personality is subject to change to a larger degree than widely assumed (e.g., Specht et al., 2014; Lucas & Donnellan, 2011).

Previous research has especially focused on mean-level change of personality scores across time (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Various studies were able to identify this kind of normative change across the life course (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011; Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001). A meta-analysis by Roberts et al. (2006) indicated that conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability increase with age, whereas for extraversion and openness change patterns seem to depend on the specific facet or phase of life under study (Roberts et al., 2006). Up to the present day researchers have not been able to reach a consensus regarding a causal explanation for this empirically well-supported plasticity among the Big Five (Specht et al., 2014).

1.2. Types of change in personality

Personality change can occur in consequence of intrinsic, i.e. genetic factors, as well as extrinsic, i.e. environmental causes (Specht et al.,

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2014). Recently, results of an increasing number of studies indicate that a one-sided perspective, whether essentialist or contextualist, is insufficient to explain personality development comprehensively (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008; Specht et al., 2011). For this reason, a transactional approach combining both perspectives was introduced: the model of person–environment transactions (Roberts et al., 2008). The model postulates a mutual influence between personality and environment.

Regarding the direction of the reciprocal influence between an individual's personality and its environment, it is possible to differentiate between two types of effects: selection effects and socialization effects. Selection effects refer to the mechanism in which personality traits influence environmental factors. On the other side, socialization effects reflect the impact that environmental factors, such as major life events, have on personality.

Despite a number of studies which have identified personality plasticity across the lifespan (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Specht et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2006), the relation between major life events and personality has often been ignored in previous research (cf. Roberts et al., 2008). The present paper thus seeks to investigate selection and socialization effects of one particular event in life that, with expanding globalization, has grown to become relevant for more and more young adults, namely, studying abroad.

1.3. Studying abroad and personality change

The question of who actually chooses to study abroad has been topic of only a few studies within the last decade (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Stroud, 2010). Since previous research has not only been scarce, but also partly controversial, the first goal of this study was to examine the links between initial levels of Big Five personality traits and the commitment to studying abroad. Most findings on the relation of personality and sojourning abroad indicate that high levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness as well as low levels of neuroticism predict international mobility (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013; Lüdtke, Roberts, Trautwein, & Nagy, 2011; Greischel, Noack, & Neyer, 2016; Jokela, 2009). Based on these previous studies, we expected to find selection effects for elevated levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Meanwhile, low levels of neuroticism were also expected to predict selection to studying abroad.

Next to the examination of selection effects, there are a handful of studies that have focused on exploring the psychological effects of international experiences by comparing sojourners with stay at home students. Most findings indicate an increase in extraversion, agreeableness, and openness in consequence of studying abroad, whereas neuroticism was observed to decrease. For conscientiousness, no effect has been found (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013; Lüdtke et al., 2011; Greischel et al., 2016). Yet again, further contributions to this body of research are required in order to generalize results. For this reason, the study's second goal was the exploration of effects of study abroad experiences on the Big Five personality dimensions. Based on the previous findings, we expected to find increases in extraversion, agreeableness and openness, and a decrease in neuroticism. For conscientiousness, we expected to find no effect (see Table 1).

2. Method

2.1. Design and procedure

This study is part of a multi-study project conducted at a small German university.¹ It features a test–retest design with two groups (sojourners vs. non-sojourners) and two measurement occasions (before and after study abroad program). Between July 2014 and February

2016, data from 370 students were collected via an online questionnaire. According to their plans for the upcoming academic semester, students were assigned to one of two groups. The first group consisted of the students who planned to attend a study abroad program in the following semester. These sojourners were approached via the international office of the university. The first measurement occasion took place approximately two to three weeks prior to the planned departure. The second measurement occasion was scheduled after a time interval of six months ($M = 6.1$ months, $SD = 1.1$), as recommended by Zimmermann and Neyer (2013), and thereby took place right after the end of the semester abroad.

For the second group, all students who did not plan on attending a study abroad program within the following semester were targeted. The recruitment of these non-sojourners was mainly organized via social networks as well as university-in-house electronic newsletters. A check for correct panel allocation was included to prevent any sojourners from taking part in the non-sojourners' survey. Analogously, two measurement occasions with a time interval of approximately six months ($M = 6.6$ months, $SD = 0.6$) were scheduled for the group of non-sojourners. As a reward for the effort, all participants had the chance to win one of three vouchers for an online bookstore and/or were granted partial course credit for participation.

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Sample size

A total of 370 enrolled students took part in the survey at t0, 155 of which were assigned to the sojourners group, whereas 215 were non-sojourners. At this point, we excluded data from six students because these participants completed the questionnaire twice. At t1 data were obtained from a total of 243 students (96 sojourners and 147 non-sojourners). Again, 17 cases had to be excluded for the same reason as before. A subsequent analysis revealed that data from another five participants who took part at t1 needed to be excluded from further analyses due to the impossibility to match the data sets to those of t0. Hence, the total sample size cleaned from irrelevant data added up to 221 participants, with 93 data sets of sojourners and 128 data sets of non-sojourners taken into account.

2.2.2. Basic characteristics

The age of participants at t0 ranged from 18 to 48 years (sojourners: $M = 22.31$, $SD = 2.03$; non-sojourners: $M = 22.84$, $SD = 4.28$), with 90% of all participants being aged approximately 19 to 29 years. With a share of 83.3% (sojourners: 81.7%; non-sojourners: 84.4%), distinctly more women than men took part in the study, $\chi^2(1, N = 221) = 549.69$, $p < 0.001$. Considering the sex ratio in the given population of the university students in general (60.0% female, $N = 9076$; Leuphana University of Lüneburg, 2014) and in the given population of students accepted into study abroad programs by the international office (64.0% female, $N = 553$; personal communication, March 23, 2016), analyses reveal strong effects for gender on participation in the study, especially for the non-sojourners, $\chi^2(1, N = 128) = 18.73$, $p < 0.001$, but also for the sojourners, $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 7.00$, $p < 0.010$. Among both sojourners and non-sojourners, 46.2% of students had previous international experiences, however, the share among sojourners was considerably higher with 53.8% versus 40.6% among non-sojourners, $\chi^2(1, N = 221) = 3.74$, $p = 0.053$.²

2.2.3. Attrition effects

To test for attrition effects, students who participated at both measurement occasions ("continuers") were compared with students who only completed the first questionnaire ("dropouts"). A total of 143 participants dropped out prior to t1, whereas 221 participants took part at

¹ As part of this multi-study project, effects of studying abroad on self-efficacy were also studied, and a corresponding article has recently been published (Petersdotter, Niehoff, & Freund, 2017).

² More detailed information on basic characteristics of the study's sample can be found in the Online Appendix (A-1).

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