

Makale Türü / Article Type:

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Gönderilme Tarihi / Submission Date:

05/06/2023

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted Date:

11/07/2023

Experiencing othering: A meta-synthesis of study abroad research

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Abstract

Research suggests a great deal of benefits of study abroad programs for both students and the host communities. As a result, millions of students worldwide choose to study in an institution outside their own country each year in the hope of learning a foreign language, developing an awareness of foreign cultures, and acquiring skills that may assist them in global contexts. However, not all study abroad students seem to benefit from such programs at the same level due to various factors. The current meta-synthesis of study abroad research examines othering as one of the factors that impedes development process of international students by reviewing 15 studies that were published in various academic journals between 2021 and 2011. The results suggest that the most frequently experienced dimension of othering is racism, followed by stereotyping and discrimination in both academic and social contexts.

Keywords: Study abroad, International students, Student mobility, Othering, Racism, Stereotyping, Discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, study abroad has seen a booming interest as regards to the number of studies carried out in this field. It has been reported that in 1975 there were 0.8 million students worldwide studying outside their country of citizenship whereas they were 4.5 million in 2012 (OECD, 2015), and the number is continuously increasing. With this substantial increase in numbers, researchers, particularly in Applied

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Atf İçin / For Citation: KIZIL, V. (2023). Experiencing othering: A meta-synthesis of study abroad research. *Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler ve Eğitim Dergisi – USBED* 5(9), 519-532. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/usbed>

Linguistics, have begun to address the issue of study abroad from an intercultural communication perspective (Kinging, 2009). Therefore, rather than simply applying post- and pre-sojourn tests to assess students' second language skills (Coleman, 2015), researchers, in addition to its benefits for language skills, have been enquiring the phenomenon in terms of its socio-linguistic and intercultural merits.

Students who study abroad; however, seem to improve their language skills at different levels (Kinging, 2011), and the researchers are trying to explore what factors play a role in stimulating or impeding their second language development. After all, language is the primary tool for any type of communication including intercultural communication. The relatively recent tendency to examine students' study abroad experiences in terms of intercultural issues has yielded many viewpoints such as cultural identity, representation, and othering (Dervin & Jackson, 2018), all of which have been problematised and emphasised in intercultural research.

Much as the issues of study abroad, intercultural encounters, identity and othering have been extensively researched for the past decade, there have not been a study which specifically examines the recent research in an attempt to identify the contexts in which study abroad students experience othering and the dimensions of othering study abroad students experience. Hence, the current study aims to fill this gap by bringing together recent studies via a meta-synthesis approach to provide an insight into the phenomenon othering the study abroad students experience. By doing do, it has the potential to cast light on the problems study abroad students experience during their interaction with the members of the host community so that such problems could be analysed and resolved by the whom it concerns including program managers as well as sending and host institutions.

Method

Informed by the literature, the current meta-synthesis study seeks answers to the following questions:

In research on study abroad between January 2011 and January 2021:

1. What contexts where students experience othering are identified?

2. What dimensions of othering do they experience?

On account of the peculiarity and sophistication of study abroad experience (Isabelli-Garcia et al., 2018), by focusing solely on the qualitative studies, the current study aims to solicit the phenomenon othering experienced by study abroad students from various research papers published between January 2011 and January 2021. To identify the studies to be synthesised, a number of systematic procedures were utilised. First, a group of selected key words were determined. The key word group includes *study abroad*, *education abroad*, *overseas education*, *student mobility*, *foreign students*, *international students*, *exchange students*, *sojourn students*, *othering*, *stereotypes*, *racism*, and *discrimination*. Then databases ERIC, Academic Search Ultimate, and Education Source were scanned in mid-May 2021 using the selected key words in various combinations. The results were filtered to be in a peer-reviewed academic journal and published from January 2011 to January 2021, resulting in over 600 studies. Articles that do not discuss the study's methods or process for data collection thus not providing a high degree of trustworthiness for findings were eliminated. Moreover, the remaining studies were screened through their abstracts and findings sections to make sure that they are relevant to the aim of the current study. A great majority of these studies turned out reporting challenging experiences of study abroad students caused by a low language proficiency during their studies, yet not necessarily causing any form of othering in the way explained in previous chapters. By excluding such studies and only selecting the qualitative studies, in which one or more individuals experienced othering while studying abroad, or mixed-method studies, in which relevant data were analysed qualitatively, the definite group of 15 studies was determined.

Once the studies were identified, they were examined carefully and extensively to extract the data relevant to the aim of the current study. Then the extracted data were analysed and integrated to create a coherent and cohesive synthesis of different dimensions of othering experienced by study abroad students in various contexts.

FINDINGS

Careful and multiple extensive readings of the articles revealed that study-abroad students experience othering in various dimensions both on and off-campus. Racism was the most frequently reported form of othering followed by stereotyping, discrimination, and alienation in both academic and social contexts.

Doerr (2020) conducted a study on four students in two study abroad programs to investigate their experiences as international students. Two Spanish-English bilingual Hispanic American students, Maria and Ned, studied in Spain and reported instances of othering. Maria faced prejudice and discrimination when she mentioned her Guatemalan origin, which negatively affected her interactions with other students. Ned experienced mistreatment after a minor traffic accident when his Latin American background was revealed. Rhein and Jones (2020) conducted a study involving 60 participants from Japan, Korea, the USA, and Burma studying in Thailand. Japanese and Korean students faced challenges mainly due to language barriers but did not encounter othering. However, American students were constantly observed due to their skin color, and Burmese students experienced multiple instances of racism, such as being forced out of taxis. Grygiel and Rebisz (2018) interviewed Ukrainian study abroad students in Poland and found that two students encountered hate speech on campus, with one targeting foreigners in general and the other specifically targeting Ukrainians. Some students also faced discrimination from an instructor who refused to interact with them in class because of their Ukrainian nationality, and one student was openly rejected by a flat owner based on her Ukrainian identity.

A troubled past between two countries; however, may not be the only source of racism. Xie et al. (2019) conducted a study on 6 Asian international students in South Africa and found that while 4 students did not experience othering, 2 students reported instances of ridicule and offensive questions about their appearance and dietary habits. Goldoni (2017) examined the experiences of a black male student, Albert, during his study abroad program in Spain. Albert faced discrimination and stereotyping based on his skin colour, leading to negative assumptions about his socio-economic status. Lee

(2017) surveyed 1702 study abroad students in South Africa and discovered that many international students, regardless of their backgrounds, faced racism in the form of hostile treatment, theft, and mistreatment by medical staff. Omeni (2016) interviewed 12 male African students in Poland and found that they experienced constant staring, invasion of personal space, verbal and physical attacks, and discrimination. Smith-Augustine et al. (2014) studied 5 American graduate students in Belize and found that their cultural interactions were initially hindered by their own prejudices and racial discrimination, with language fluency being a determining factor in their perceived value of others.

Reviewed studies also revealed a dimension of othering where the individuals discriminated other people in the form of stereotyping. Grant (2018) conducted a study on Australian undergraduate university students participating in short-term study abroad programs in the performing arts in Cambodia. The study revealed stereotypical attitudes from both the students and the host community, such as shock over a woman owning an expensive electronic gadget and the expectation that Western students would excel in technology-related matters. Song (2020) interviewed a Saudi female student, Fay, studying in the US to explore her experiences with gender socialisation and identity negotiation. Fay experienced othering based on her ethnic identity and gender, including criticism from Saudi peers for not conforming to expected behaviours and being ignored by American male peers after greeting them. An instructor also stereotyped Fay, assuming her difficulty in a language-intensive course was due to her shyness as a Saudi woman. Rawlins (2012) interviewed female study abroad students from the US in a European country and found that they experienced public harassment, including catcalling and unsolicited sexual comments, as well as instances of being followed by strange men to their residences. Sharma et al. (2011) examined how teacher-candidates from the US developed multicultural competencies during a study visit to Honduras. One student expressed surprise at the high academic level of local students, despite preconceived notions that Honduras, being a poorer country, would lack resources for its schools.

Another dimension of othering could be experienced as academic discrimination. Laufer and Gorup (2018) conducted interviews with 11 international doctoral students who discontinued their studies at a university in a European Union country to investigate their experiences and the impact of these experiences on their decision to leave. Some students reported facing pressures from their academic supervisors that domestic students did not encounter. Due to their unfamiliarity with the academic system and culture at the host institution, their supervisors excessively focused on their mistakes and used their contracts as a means of intimidation, leading to feelings of alienation and reduced confidence in their studies. Another student described a violation of privacy by their supervisor, who requested access to their password-protected digital agenda. The student felt compelled to comply, and as a result, the supervisor monitored their academic meetings and even personal appointments, such as hospital visits.

Othering may also occur in the form of cultural discrimination. Amadasi and Holliday (2017) conducted interviews with two international postgraduate students to explore their experiences of traveling to unfamiliar cultural domains. They used a qualitative approach within a postmodern and social constructivist framework. The analysis of the interviews revealed that one of the students consistently created a dichotomy between "us" and "them" by criticizing the attitudes and behaviours of the host community, despite being an observer rather than a participant. For instance, during an interview, she expressed discomfort when witnessing a couple hugging. She consistently used pronouns such as "we" and "they," as well as phrases like "in our culture" and "in their culture," effectively separating herself and the host community into distinct categories.

Lastly, international students may experience alienation resulting from othering. Bjork et al. (2020) conducted a study documenting the experiences of study abroad students at Bailey College, a liberal arts institution in the US. They interviewed 28 undergraduate students who were not US citizens using 37 core questions over a period of 5 weeks. While most students reported positive experiences, some found the orientation program for international students problematic. They felt that organising a separate program for study abroad students highlighted the differences between international and domestic students. Furthermore, some students mentioned that the general new-student

orientation program, which followed the international students orientation, contributed to feelings of alienation and loneliness. This was because the program focused too much on US-centric activities and failed to acknowledge the presence of international students, making them feel invisible.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the reviewed studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the different dimensions of othering experienced by study abroad students. These experiences of othering highlight the challenges and complexities that international students face in their host countries. Examining these dimensions can offer insight into the broader implications for study abroad programs and the need for inclusive practices.

Racism emerged as a significant form of othering reported by study abroad students across multiple studies. The experiences of Asian students in South Africa, African students in Poland, and black students in Spain demonstrate how racial prejudices and stereotypes can lead to discrimination, negative assumptions, and mistreatment. These instances highlight the importance of addressing racism within host institutions and societies, as it can significantly impact the well-being and academic success of international students.

Stereotyping, another dimension of othering, was evident in the experiences of students in various contexts. The stereotypical expectations placed on Western students in Cambodia and Saudi female students in the US illustrate how preconceived notions can shape perceptions and treatment of international students. These stereotypes can contribute to feelings of pressure, exclusion, and isolation, reinforcing cultural divisions and hindering cross-cultural interactions.

Academic discrimination also emerged as a significant aspect of othering experienced by study abroad students. The pressures faced by international doctoral students and the violation of privacy by supervisors illustrate how power dynamics within academic environments can contribute to alienation and a loss of confidence. Such experiences

can have profound effects on students' academic journeys, potentially leading to the decision to discontinue their studies.

Cultural discrimination further compounds the challenges faced by study abroad students. The creation of a dichotomy between *us* and *them* by one student, as identified by Amadasi and Holliday (2017), showcases how cultural differences can be used to separate and exclude individuals. These instances of cultural discrimination highlight the need for fostering cultural understanding, respect, and inclusivity within study abroad programs.

The experiences of alienation reported by study abroad students also emphasise the significance of orientation programs and support services. The separate orientation program for study abroad students, while intended to assist their transition, can inadvertently contribute to feelings of isolation and highlight differences between international and domestic students. The lack of acknowledgment of international students in general new-student orientation programs further reinforces their sense of invisibility and exacerbates feelings of alienation and loneliness.

When all these findings are considered, it becomes evident that study abroad students face multifaceted challenges related to othering. These challenges arise from various sources, including racial prejudices, stereotypes, power dynamics within academic environments, cultural differences, and a lack of inclusive support systems. It is crucial for host institutions and study abroad programs to recognise and address these issues through comprehensive orientation programs, cultural sensitivity training, and the creation of inclusive spaces that celebrate diversity. By fostering an environment that promotes understanding, respect, and inclusivity, institutions can enhance the study abroad experiences of international students and create a sense of belonging that supports their academic and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

The current meta-synthesis of study abroad research reveals that study abroad students frequently experience othering, particularly through racism and stereotyping. Students

report discrimination, mistreatment, and ridicule based on their nationality, ethnic origins, and skin colour. Both studies abroad students and host community members exhibit stereotypical behaviours towards each other. Academic and cultural discrimination are also prevalent, with instructors misusing their power and mistreating international students, and study abroad students creating an *us* versus *them* dichotomy between themselves and the host community.

Despite the challenges and conflicts faced by study abroad students, it is important to acknowledge the benefits of such programs. Research suggests that even in difficult situations, study abroad students can develop valuable social skills and navigate troubled contexts to their advantage (Page & Chahboun, 2019). However, it is crucial to address and reject the racial, stereotypical, and negative attitudes and behaviours that study abroad students encounter. Sending institutions and program directors should equip students with unbiased knowledge about the host community, while receiving institutions and individuals responsible for student well-being must establish policies against discrimination and promote integration between international students and the host community. By addressing these issues, study abroad programs can ensure that all students have a positive and inclusive experience.

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