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ARTICLE



Stranger in a strange land: The role of study abroad in civic virtues

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ABSTRACT

What leads people to contribute to public life, to strengthen social cohesion, and work to better society? We investigated how co-curricular aspects of college life relate to social cognitive processes foundational for civic virtues and contribute to their development. We examined one widespread type of co-curricular college experience—studying abroad. When studying abroad, students encounter different social norms and cultures and often interact with others using a non-native language. How does immersion in an unfamiliar society affect psychological capacities, such as epistemic humility and regard for others, that may be central to civic virtues? We compared measures of civic virtues across students who studied abroad, students interested in studying abroad who had not yet had that experience, and students with no interest in studying abroad to understand how differences in civic engagement and civility relate to aspects of students' psychology such as epistemic humility, empathy, and need for cognition.





KEYWORDS

Civic virtues; college activities; civic engagement; civility; empathy

Even in the classroom we are beginning to learn that learning which develops intelligence and character does not come about when only the textbook and the teacher have a say; that every individual becomes educated only as he has an opportunity to contribute something from his own experience, no matter how meagre or slender that background of experience may be at a given time; and finally that enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experiences and ideas.

John Dewey (1938, p. 296)

We live in a global community. The past few years of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed the interwoven nature of the world's communities. From lack of supplies during lockdowns to quick dependence on working virtually and connecting with others online, we have seen the world become a much smaller place. We have felt the need to consider not only how our judgments and decisions impact others but also to examine our relationship to community more generally. What leads people to contribute to public life, to strengthen social cohesion, and to work toward a better society? What experiences contribute to the development of underlying civic virtues that foster communal orientation and engagement?

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Recent attention has focused on the formal teaching of character (Jeynes, 2019) and citizenship (Torney-Purta, 2002) but the potential role for non-didactic forms of experiential education also merit attention. Indeed, Callan (1997) has argued that formal educational methods may not provide the best path toward developing civic virtues. For students, venues for the development of civic virtues include not only class time, but extra-curricular activities and community-based programs that may help to broaden civic knowledge and encourage civic participation (Sherrod et al., 2002). The proximal relationships with teachers and community leaders that such relatively informal experiences engender likely have a larger influence on student civic development than distal leaders such as the President or public officials, thus reinforcing the need for community involvement to develop civic-mindedness (Flanagan et al., 2007). Moreover, recent research confirms the impact of non-formal education and informal personal experiences on value preferences such as openness and respect for others (Ferrari et al., 2019) that might lend themselves to civic-minded attitudes and engagement.

While the focus of higher education is typically on academic training and success, there has been increased recognition of the role of universities in shaping civically engaged citizens (Bringle et al., 1999; Colby et al., 2003). Perhaps more to the point, students themselves spend a great deal of time at college engaged in non-scholarly, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. How do these nonformal aspects of collegiate experience affect the development of civic virtues? Recent research suggests that multiple pedagogical approaches including study abroad, co-curricular service-learning, and directed curriculum all contribute to a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship development (Black & Duhon, 2006; Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Kishino & Takahashi, 2019; Whitley & Yoder, 2015). The current paper focuses on the potential role for non-didactic educational experiences in college to foster civic engagement and the psychological capacities that undergird it. We focus specifically on one particularly prevalent, co-curricular collegiate experience—studying abroad. Study abroad expands students' social boundaries, providing the opportunity for them to become part of and develop connections to a broader community. We hypothesize this experience may both broaden and strengthen students' understanding of other people and societies, their tolerance for differences in perspective, and their sense of their own relationship to community through recognition of shared humanity. We suggest that these are the sorts of underlying psychological capacities and orientations that may be critical to the exercise of civic virtues in terms of both interpersonal civility and civic engagement.

Civility and civic engagement reflect respect for others and a willingness to invest effort in society. The present research is motivated by the fact that in studying abroad students interact with students and others from countries, cultures, and backgrounds that differ from their own. These experiences not only introduce novel ways of understanding the world and of organizing society but can also challenge students to examine their own deeply held assumptions and perspectives. When studying abroad, simply accomplishing everyday tasks as students go about pursuing their educational goals requires accommodating to different socio-cultural expectations for interacting with others. Perhaps of even greater significance, building meaningful relationships requires actively taking the perspective of people whose worldviews and personal reactions students may not immediately or fully understand but with whom they share a common humanity. We suspect that adapting

to these challenges can engender epistemic humility for one's own worldview, empathy for others, and a reorientation of one's view of themselves in connection to community.

Of course, individuals do not respond uniformly to such challenges to their daily routines, social interactions, and worldviews. We expect that students open to engaging cognitive challenges may adapt more readily and reap more positive benefits from study abroad. Indeed, recent research has found Need for Cognition, a measure of willingness to engage cognitive effort, is strongly related to both epistemic humility and emotional regulation (Schneider et al., 2021) as well as predictive of moral behavior (Strobel et al., 2017). Thus, we expect individual differences in the tendency to engage in cognitive effort may play a role in civic outcomes.

Thus, the fundamental question in the study presented here is whether certain kinds of co-curricular experiences for undergraduates, namely study abroad programs, are associated with positive benefits that could foster civic virtues. To investigate this question, we examined interpersonal civility and civic engagement in students who have studied abroad and those who have not. In addition to these measures of civic virtues, we explored psychological characteristics that might be related to civic virtue development including epistemic humility, empathy, need for cognition (NFC), and cultural competence. In testing the hypothesis that studying abroad has benefits for civic virtues, we recognize the possibility that self-selection for studying abroad and the related individual differences it entails may be responsible for any differences we find in civic virtues. To address this, we compare students who have already completed study abroad with those who want to study abroad but have not yet embarked on their study abroad program. These two groups of students are presumably matched and equivalent in their interests in other countries and cultures as well as other factors that motivate students to study abroad; thus, differences in civic virtues between these two groups are likely to reflect the actual experience of having studied abroad. In contrast, students who are interested in studying abroad but have not yet done so and students who have no interest in studying abroad may differ in a number of ways other than this interest but, critically, are equivalent in not having had the experience of studying abroad. Thus, comparing the civic virtues of these two groups allows us to assess whether dispositional differences can account for any differences we find in civic virtues. By comparing roughly matched groups (two groups with an interest in studying abroad, differing in the actual experience, and two groups without the experience of studying abroad but differing in their interest and orientation towards studying abroad) we may separate the role of the experience of studying abroad on manifestation of civic virtues from the role that interest in studying abroad, regardless of experience, may have on civic virtues.

Method

Participants

A total of 198 undergraduates (aged 18–24, $M = 20.6$ years, 73% female) currently enrolled at the University of Chicago participated in the study and completed the surveys; 95 had completed the university's study abroad program, 69 were interested in studying abroad but had not yet done so, and 34 reported no interest in studying abroad (international students—those students who came to the United States to study at the University of

Chicago—were excluded from our sample). Subjects were recruited via a variety of online university resources including UChicago Facebook groups and the Psychology Department’s research participant recruitment system as well as by directly emailing University of Chicago students who had studied abroad between September 2018 and September 2021 or who had registered for study abroad during that time but had not yet done so. Participants were compensated either by course credit or a \$10 Amazon gift card, whichever they preferred, and were entered into a lottery for a \$100 Amazon gift card. The largest number of students identified as Caucasian, (44%), with 24% identifying as Asian, 7% as Latine, 3.5% as African American, 17% as mixed race, and 4.5% as other.

Study abroad program characteristics: Individual study abroad experiences vary greatly depending on a variety of factors including the length of the program, its location, and the level of immersion. While there was a great deal of variability among our participant sample in respect to the specific study-abroad program characteristics, in all programs respondents had ample opportunity to interact with people from other countries and cultures during their study abroad. A majority of our sample, 88%, studied abroad for at least one academic quarter, with a little over 5% studying abroad for the full year and the rest participating in intensive, month-long courses. In addition, most students (71%) lived in a residence with foreign students (host country or other international students) or with host families; less than a third lived in private housing or in residence with only University of Chicago students. While approximately half of respondents (49%) participated in study abroad programs that were held in University of Chicago personnel staffed centers in foreign universities (such as the University of Chicago Center in Paris), their classes included host country students, other international study abroad students, as well as students from University of Chicago. However, for most students (85%) classes were conducted predominantly in English. Finally, the majority of respondents (65%) studied abroad in a European country, 15% studied in Asia, 9% in Africa, 8% in Latin America, and 3% in other areas, such as the Middle East.

While we did not collect information on respondents’ majors, the University of Chicago study abroad office reports enrolling students across all disciplines in the college, with approximately 45% majoring in the Social Sciences, 20% in Humanities, 15% undeclared and between 5% and 10% in each of the biological sciences and physical sciences. While we don’t know whether this distribution of majors is representative of the groups in our sample, there is no reason to expect it would be different for students who have completed study abroad and those who have not yet embarked on their study abroad program, the main focus of our study.

In addition to their experience studying abroad, students in the University’s study abroad program also attend several preparatory meetings about their specific programs and locations and upon their return, have the opportunity to participate in a number of post-abroad events including course and program evaluations. While this programming may enhance the experience of studying abroad, it isn’t directly related to the measures of civility and civic engagement we are interested in here. Thus, we are confident it is not the source of any group differences we find in these variables.

Measures and procedure

We used two measures to assess civic virtues: Doolittle and Faul's (2013) 14-item Civic Engagement Scale, which separately measures civic attitudes and civic behaviors, and the Workplace Relational Civility scale (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016), adapted for our student population, to measure civility towards others. Epistemic humility was measured with a scale developed at the Center for Practical Wisdom at the University of Chicago (Hoeckner, 2011, personal communication). Empathy for others was measured using the 8-item Empathy Quotient (Loewen et al., 2009). We also measured the tendency to engage in cognitive effort using the 6-item Need for Cognition (NFC) short form scale (Coelho et al., 2020). Students were given a survey of cultural competence questions on study abroad involvement or international travel if they had not studied abroad. Participants completed all surveys in a randomized order in a single, online session.

Results

We assessed differences among the groups on the dependent measures of civic attitudes and behaviors, interpersonal civility, epistemic humility, empathy, need for cognition, and cultural competence using a between participants design comparing three groups of students based on their study abroad experience and interest: (1) those who had studied abroad (group SA), (2) those who had an interest in studying abroad but had not yet done so (noSA), and (3) those not interested in studying abroad (noInt). Groups SA and noSA have similar interest in studying abroad but vary in the experience of actually having studied abroad. Thus, these students are likely similar in qualities related to interest in other people and cultures. By comparison, Groups noSA and noInt differed in their interest in studying abroad but were equivalent in that neither group had the experience of having studied abroad.

Comparing the two groups who had not studied abroad, i.e., those with interest in studying abroad (noSA) and those without (noInt), establishes differences that could be attributable to underlying dispositional differences in these groups rather than to the effects of actually studying abroad. However, there were no significant differences (assessed by independent sample t-tests) between these two groups on civic attitudes (noSA $M = 43.8$, noInt $M = 43.4$), civic behaviors (noSA $M = 27.0$, noInt $M = 27.6$), civility toward others (noSA $M = 51.4$, noInt $M = 51.6$), empathy (noSA $M = 28.5$, noInt $M = 29.5$), or epistemic humility (noSA $M = 91.4$, noInt $M = 88.3$). Further, as generally representative of University of Chicago undergraduates, these students do not differ on need for cognition (noSA $M = 22.3$, noInt $M = 22.0$). Thus, students who did not study abroad are quite similar on a number of psychological measures related to civic virtues whether they are interested in studying abroad or not. It is interesting to note however that these groups do differ ($t(101) = 2.63$, $p < .01$) on a measure of cultural competence such that students with an interest in studying abroad score higher ($M = 35.1$) than students with no interest ($M = 32.1$). While not a large difference, it suggests that although these are generally similar students, the interest in studying abroad has a relationship to knowledge of other cultures.

Overall, the similarity of students with an interest in studying abroad to those with no interest, when neither group has studied abroad, suggests that any differences we find

between students who *have* studied abroad and those who *have not* but are interested in doing so, are likely to be attributable to the experience of studying abroad rather than to underlying dispositional differences in these groups. Students who had studied abroad (SA) compared to those who had not yet done so (noSA) score significantly higher on civic engagement behavior/activities (SA $M = 29.4$, noSA $M = 27.0$, $t(162) = 1.97$, $p < .05$) although there was no difference between the groups in civic attitudes ($t(162) = 1.10$, ns). Further, students who studied abroad scored higher on civility to others (SA $M = 53.4$ vs noSA $M = 51.4$) although this was only marginally significant $t(162) = 1.53$, $p < .1$). Together, these results suggest that studying abroad may increase civic virtues. Further, empathy towards others is greater ($t(162) = 3.04$, $p < .01$) for students who had studied abroad ($M = 30.5$) compared to those who had not yet studied abroad but were interested in doing so ($M = 28.5$). Epistemic humility, a measure of knowing the strengths and limits of one's knowledge, is also significantly different ($t(196) = 1.91$, $p < .05$) between students who study abroad ($M = 94.1$) and all those who do not ($M = 90.4$). As might be expected, cultural competence is significantly higher ($t(162) = 2.07$, $p < .05$) in those who study abroad ($M = 36.5$) compared to those who had an interest in studying abroad but had not yet done so ($M = 35.1$), who themselves were significantly higher than students with no interest in studying abroad ($M = 32.1$) as noted above.

We modeled the two measures of civic virtues—civility towards others, and civic engagement behaviors—using linear regression as predicted by the psychological variables of empathy, epistemic humility, need for cognition, and cultural competency separately for the students who had studied abroad and for the students with an interest in studying abroad who had not yet done so. In essence, modeling this separately for these groups indicates how this given set of psychological factors and cultural competence are differentially predictive of civic virtues for these groups. For students who had studied abroad, civic engagement behavior is significantly modeled ($F(4,90) = 8.01$, $R = .512$, $p < .001$) by cultural competence ($t = 2.72$, $p < .01$) and need for cognition ($t = 2.04$, $p < .05$) with epistemic humility ($t = 1.49$, $p < .1$) marginally significant and empathy ($t = .645$, ns), not significant. The same model for students interested in studying abroad without the experience reveals none of these variables are significant predictors of civic engagement behavior. Thus, even though students with an interest in studying abroad but without the experience score significantly higher on cultural competence than students with no interest in studying abroad, this is not a significant predictor of civic engagement. This pattern suggests study abroad serves as an important catalyst in combination with need for cognition and epistemic humility in fostering civic engagement.

For the second measure related to civic virtue, civility to others, the regression model for students who studied abroad is also significant ($F(5,89) = 16.9$, $R = .698$, $p < .001$) with empathy ($t = 3.80$, $p < .01$), epistemic humility ($t = 2.63$, $p < .01$) and cultural competence ($t = 3.04$, $p < .01$) all acting as significant predictors of civility, whereas need for cognition is not. For students with an interest in studying abroad but who had not yet done so, empathy ($t = 5.5$, $p < .01$) and epistemic humility ($t = 2.59$, $p < .01$) are also significant predictors of civility whereas cultural competence is not. This result suggests that while empathy and epistemic humility may generally relate to civility towards others, the increase in civility we found for students who had studied abroad is likely undergirded by cultural competence.

Discussion

Overall, students who had studied abroad were more engaged in civic activities and behaviors, had greater empathy and a trend towards greater civility towards others, and had greater epistemic humility than did students who were interested in studying abroad or had no interest in this experience. This suggests these differences are not simply dispositional differences in these populations but reflect the experience of living and studying abroad. Moreover, regression modeling suggests that higher cultural competence scores from studying abroad, which have also been found in prior studies (Black & Duhon, 2006; Carlson & Widaman, 1988) work with need for cognition, epistemic humility and empathy to increase civic virtues. On the one hand, the experience of studying abroad, that is, being an outsider in a foreign country, may strengthen kinship with others whose habits, experiences, and views are very different from one's own but it also provides an opportunity for perspective taking, contemplation, and reflection on what it means to be considered 'other' and what it might take to develop community. As most of our sample lived with host country students, host country families, or other international students, we might infer living within a different community has profound impact on these students, even if they are studying with American professors in English. It appears from these results then that the experience of studying abroad may foster civic minded behaviors by psychological characteristics and processes that are central to civic virtues.

It is interesting to note that students with an interest in studying abroad score higher in cultural competence than those who have no interest in studying abroad. This is important because it suggests students with an interest in studying abroad have a stronger prior understanding of different cultures. It may be that students who have less cultural awareness than others may also have less curiosity about other cultures and thus less interest in studying abroad. Indeed, about half of the students who were not interested in studying abroad had not traveled internationally prior to college while only one quarter of the other two groups had not previously traveled internationally.

We also show that need for cognition, a proclivity for engaging in effortful thought about problems generally, is related to civic engagement in students who study abroad whereas it is not for students who have an interest but have not yet studied abroad. Moreover, we found marginal support for the relation of epistemic humility to civic engagement. Were this trend for epistemic humility reliable, it would suggest that students who engage thinking about complex issues and study abroad become more cognizant of the limits of their own knowledge and value the perspective of others, perhaps leading them to engage with others in jointly addressing civic issues. That is, those students who like to engage in thinking, may reflect on those study abroad experiences that challenge their knowledge and beliefs, rendering them open to others' perspectives and thus impacting their comportment towards others. We demonstrate here that studying abroad in general has a positive influence on citizenship behaviors when compared to those students who have not yet been able to study abroad and those who have no interest in studying abroad.

Overall, incorporating co-curricular experiences in higher education appears to affect civic virtue development. Students who study abroad score higher on measures of civic virtues such as civic engagement and marginally higher on interpersonal

civility. In addition, empathy, epistemic humility, and cultural competence are higher in students who study abroad and these psychological capacities are related to increased civic virtues. The experience of studying abroad and learning about others' lives, language, and culture may lead to higher levels of civic engagement and civility because students learn more explicitly the limits of their own world view and develop a sense of empathy for those people they are not as familiar with. Experience with other cultures and countries can increase respect for other people, for their practices, and their values. Learning the limits of one's own sociocultural knowledge may, together with the right experiences, lead to an appreciation for other people and for the importance of respect for others. This effect may even go beyond the attitudes students hold for others and motivate students to actively seek out opportunities for greater civic engagement.

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