

Study Abroad and Moral Development

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## Abstract

Why should students study abroad? The standard answer universities give cites three types of benefit: academic, cultural, and professional. We argue that this answer sells the value of study abroad short. Just as important as any of these benefits is the value study abroad has in promoting moral development. Drawing on key ideas of the seminal developmental psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, we make the case that study abroad can facilitate moral development, whether one understands morality in utilitarian, Kantian, or sentimentalist terms. It does so by helping students take the perspective of those who are culturally different, inducing the cognitive disequilibrium that is crucial to growth in moral and empirical knowledge, and expanding the scope of feelings of empathy.

### Study Abroad and Moral Development

In promoting their study-abroad programs, universities typically appeal to the academic, cultural, and professional benefits that participation can bring. For example, Rice University boasts that its “study abroad programs offer some of the most exciting and academically enriching opportunities available to you as an undergraduate” (“Welcome,” n.d.). The University of Miami’s Study Abroad Office indicates that its mission is to “foster ... multicultural understanding” and “[strengthen] ... global perspectives” (“About Us,” n.d.). The University of Colorado, Boulder, touts that participation in its study-abroad offerings can “[e]nhance your résumé,” help you “[m]ake connections for future international travel and/or work,” and “[i]mprove your financial potential” (“Why Study Abroad?,” n.d.). Despite the promotional character of such pronouncements, we do not doubt that there is significant truth in the claim that study-abroad programs provide academic, cultural, and professional enrichment to students—especially in an increasingly globalized and competitive economy.<sup>1</sup> However, focusing on these types of enrichment alone crucially underestimates the value of study-abroad experiences. Just as valuable, we argue, is the role study abroad plays in students’ *moral development*.

Why are universities not calling attention to this virtue of study abroad in addition to the others? One reason, we suspect, is that it is unrecognized. The question of the nature of moral behavior and moral character is an enormously complex and controversial one, and it is not as obvious that study abroad will make a student a better *person* as it is that it will enrich him or her intellectually, deepen his or her understanding of another culture (and perhaps another language), and help him or her stand out from other job applicants. Second, most universities do not conceive of their missions as encompassing the *moral* development of their students, though it is

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of the *academic* successes—and shortcomings—of study abroad, see Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012).

a matter of course that their missions include intellectual development (including an understanding of other cultures) and preparation to enter the professional world. We suspect a third reason, related to the second but more tacit, is that most universities are reluctant to state or imply that their students could benefit from further moral development, for fear of giving umbrage.

Such squeamishness should be overcome. There is nothing objectionable (setting aside the skepticism of moral nihilists) about supposing that anyone is capable of further moral growth, just as there is nothing objectionable about supposing that anyone is capable of further intellectual growth. Religious universities have long been comfortable with this notion. The University of Notre Dame, for instance, unabashedly proclaims the cultivation of various moral sensitivities and commitments in its students as part of its overall mission:

[T]he University seeks to cultivate in its students not only an appreciation for the great achievements of human beings but also a disciplined sensibility to the poverty, injustice and oppression that burden the lives of so many. The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice. (“Mission Statement,” n.d.)

Some public universities have recently begun taking steps to avow the aim of developing students’ moral character. The university where one of the authors of this article teaches has an official “public affairs” mission that includes three components: “ethical leadership,” “cultural competence,” and “community engagement” (“What is Public Affairs?,” n.d.). *Ethical leadership* obviously requires moral virtue, and the promotion of cultural *competence* and community *engagement* strongly suggests aims of a moral nature.

But what is the relevance of study abroad to moral development? Given the complexity of and controversy surrounding the nature of moral development, as well as the wide variety of study-abroad experiences, no precise answer can be given within the confines of a single essay. Nevertheless, it is possible to provide a compelling sketch of moral benefits accruing to students who participate in study-abroad programs, where the benefits are endorsed as moral from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

### **The Structure of Moral Virtue**

The fruit of the moral development of an individual is greater moral virtue, and the fruit of greater moral virtue is more reliably moral behavior by the individual; simply put, the individual does more good and less bad, and not just by accident. Moral behavior, broadly speaking, is based on two factors, one cognitive—knowledge—and the other affective—motivation. We may further divide the cognitive element of moral behavior into *moral* knowledge and *empirical* knowledge (including scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, and, in general, knowledge of accurate descriptions of events and conditions in the world). To behave morally, individuals need to (1) know what type of action is moral (morally required or merely morally permissible) in a certain type of circumstance (this being moral knowledge), (2) know (or at least have largely true beliefs about) the circumstances in which they are acting, including their options and, in most if not all cases, the effects those options will have on others (this being a kind of empirical knowledge), and (3) be sufficiently motivated that they perform a moral action. A strong case can be made that study-abroad experience can prove highly valuable in all three respects.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, we attempt to do just this, drawing on the seminal work of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that study-abroad experiences are indispensable for robust moral development or that study-abroad experiences cannot, from the point of view of moral development, occasionally “backfire,” reinforcing existing biases or vices or even giving rise to new ones. We are promoting the moral value not of all study-abroad experiences but of those for which students are prepared in an appropriate way.

developmental psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, as well the work of leading figures in the history of moral philosophy.

That reliable moral behavior has both a cognitive and an affective foundation can be readily seen by considering two extreme personality types: the sociopath and what we shall call the radical loyalist. The sociopath often knows exactly which kinds of action are prescribed or proscribed by morality; he or she just doesn't care. Sociopaths may possess the *cognitive* foundation for reliably moral behavior, but they lack the *affective* foundation—more specifically in this case, a motivating feeling. Radical loyalists, on the other hand, are unduly under the sway of feelings of loyalty to persons and causes, irrespective of their moral rectitude. The *cognitive* foundation of their moral agency is deficient. They feel loyalty to a person or cause—say, Hitler or Nazism—but, cognitively, they don't perceive the errors—for example, regarding the characteristics of Jews—on which the actions of the person or cause rest. Neither cognition nor affect alone is sufficient for reliably moral behavior.

Both the cognitive and the affective foundation for reliably moral behavior must be constructed; neither is inborn. This is obvious with respect to the cognitive prerequisites of moral behavior—the knowledge component; we aren't born with knowledge that certain types of action are moral and others immoral. Yet the point is true for the affective prerequisites as well. Yes, there is strong evidence that evolution has fashioned us (with exceptions at the margins, such as sociopaths) into beings with an innate disposition toward sympathy. (Here, the term “sympathy” is used in the broad sense of sharing the feelings of another sentient being, so as to include the more narrow affective state of empathy.) We see abundant signs of sympathetic behavior in our closest genetic cousins, chimpanzees and bonobos (de Waal, 2009), as well as in human infants (Kanakogi, Okumura, Inoue, Kitazaki, & Itakura, 2013). However, sympathy alone can lead us

morally astray, as when it attaches to an unjust aggressor rather than an unjust victim. And there is no reason to believe that the moral unreliability of sympathy can be rectified by the mere addition of more affect; rather, moral knowledge is needed as a corrective.

### **Some Key Elements of Moral Development**

How, then, does one acquire the cognitive and affective bases of moral virtue? A detailed answer is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is not necessary for our purposes. We wish, first, drawing upon the theories of moral development of Piaget and Kohlberg, to outline a few key elements of moral development and then to explain how those elements can be facilitated by study abroad.

### **Cognitive Disequilibrium and the Accommodation of New Information**

Our framework for understanding cognitive development—and moral development, insofar as it depends on cognitive development—draws in part from the work of the most influential psychologist in this field, Jean Piaget. Our account focuses primarily on *The Psychology of Intelligence* (1950/2001), in which Piaget argues that human beings are born with an innate ability to impose structure and organization on what would otherwise be a chaotic understanding of the world. These organized ways of understanding he labeled “schemata,” basic building blocks of cognitive development which are constantly being modified and revised as an individual encounters new information. Even in earliest infancy, human beings utilize schemata. Piaget contended that when individuals encounter something new (either object or information), they attempt to incorporate it into an existing schema. When they do so successfully, they “assimilate” the new information. When they cannot successfully incorporate the new information into any of their existing schemata, individuals move into a state of “disequilibrium.” They must therefore modify one or more schemata, a process Piaget termed

“accommodation,” in order to restore cognitive equilibrium. “Throughout its formation,” Piaget observed, “thought is in disequilibrium or in a state of unstable equilibrium; every new acquisition modifies previous ideas or risks involving a contradiction” (1950/2001, p. 43).

Hence, new experiences and encounters are crucial for the cognitive component of moral development because they potentially trigger cognitive disequilibrium and a consequent effort to revise and expand our understandings.

### **From Egocentrism to Conventionalism to Universalism**

A fundamental limitation of the thought of the young child, according to Piaget, is that it is “egocentric”: “[T]he child thinks for himself without troubling to make himself understood nor to place himself at the other person’s point of view” (1928, p. 1). Egocentrism manifests itself in a variety of ways, but one of the main manifestations is the inability to engage in what psychologists call *perspective-taking*: Young children cannot put themselves in another person’s perspective and, therefore, believe that others—even inanimate others—think and feel the way they do. Though egocentrism is an unavoidable psychological fact only for young children (or for those with certain cognitive impairments), people remain, even into adulthood, egocentric to some degree or other. We believe egocentrism is an obstacle to all three dimensions of moral development identified above: moral knowledge, empirical knowledge, and motivation.

An accurate and precise characterization of the egocentrist’s deficit in moral knowledge will depend on what the true theory of morality is, which is a far more vexed and profound question than we can hope to answer here. But we need not know which moral theory is true to be convinced that the egocentrist is deficient with respect to moral cognition. The moral counterpart of an egocentric psychology is ethical egoism, the view that the morally best thing for one to do is whatever best promotes one’s self-interest, precisely because it best promotes



one's self-interest. Ethical egoism has found little favor in the history of philosophy (the blandishments of Ayn Rand notwithstanding). The moral philosopher James Rachels (2012) describes its core, fatal flaw this way:

It advocates dividing the world into two categories of people—ourselves and everyone else—and it urges us to regard the interests of those in the first group as more important than the interests of those in the second group. But each of us can ask, What is the difference between me and everyone else that justifies placing myself in this special category? Do I enjoy life more? Are my needs and abilities different from the needs and abilities of others? In short, *what makes me so special?* Failing an answer, it turns out that Ethical Egoism is an arbitrary doctrine. (p. 81)

The arbitrariness of which Rachels speaks is apparent from a variety of theoretical perspectives. From a sentimentalist point of view *à la* David Hume, it disregards the moral value of benevolence, which is a virtue because “the benevolent or softer affections ... wherever they appear, engage the approbation, and good-will of mankind” (Hume, 1751/1983, p. 16). From a utilitarian point of view, ethical egoism unjustifiably privileges the happiness of one sentient being over the happiness of others. From a Kantian point of view, it fails to respect other rational agents as “ends in themselves” (Kant, 1785/1993, p. 428)<sup>3</sup>—that is, beings with intrinsic value or “dignity” (pp. 434–35)—regarding them instead as mere instruments for one's own purposes.

In terms of their moral judgments, children typically mature out of an egocentric standpoint as they grapple intellectually with life experience. To help frame our understanding this moral development, we draw upon the influential ideas of the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), who was influenced heavily by Piaget's understanding of cognitive

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<sup>3</sup> All page references to Kant's works follow the standard, Academy edition of Kant's collected works in German.

development. For Kohlberg, cognitive development was the necessary foundation for moral development. Kohlberg maintained that “moral development depends on a person’s level of cognitive development,” and “moral development requires us to feel a certain degree of disequilibrium, or discomfort with our current way of thinking, to spur our cognitive construction of more complex and sophisticated reasoning about moral questions” (Cook & Cook, 2009, p. 279). Thus, individuals first need a cognitive understanding provided by a capacity for perspective-taking.

This is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral behavior; it enables us to (better) understand the perspective of others affected by our actions (or omissions). But it does not by itself yield the second key component, motivation to act. Action requires a sense of uneasiness—not provided by understanding alone—that must be resolved. Like Piaget, Kohlberg believed that moral development, understood as encompassing both cognitive and affective changes, required new encounters that create disequilibrium. One must feel some dissonance in regard to one’s beliefs and actions in order to modify them. An important part of one’s moral development consists in changing one’s beliefs and actions to overcome the dissonance.

Based upon answers given to hypothetical moral dilemmas, Kohlberg postulated three broad levels of moral reasoning, each incorporating two stages, for a total of six stages. At the first, or *pre-conventional*, level, individuals solve moral dilemmas by assessing punishments and rewards for themselves (Stage 1) and then by following rules when they serve their own purposes, recognizing that these purposes may conflict with the needs of others (Stage 2). At Kohlberg’s second, or *conventional*, level, advances in cognitive development are accompanied by modifications in moral reasoning, as individuals begin to recognize social order and conformity as the moral good. Participants in the third stage promote a “Golden Rule” mentality

that focuses on reciprocity in interpersonal relations. In the fourth stage, individuals focus on the larger social context, regarding the rules of society as the moral good. It seems logical to conclude that the experiences of children in elementary school promote conventional moral reasoning, likely as a result of learning to follow classroom rules, regularly interacting with peers in the classroom and on the playground, and being part of a cohort. In the final, or *post-conventional*, level, participants in the fifth stage focus on individual rights and begin to move away from a purely conventional standpoint, while participants in the sixth stage begin to contemplate and adopt transcendent moral principles. Notions such as moral universality and civil disobedience are found at this level. As with Piaget, Kohlberg's final level has been criticized, particularly the sixth stage, because it seems that only a small percentage of the population (researchers argue perhaps less than 20%) reach this level of sophisticated moral reasoning. But, also as with Piaget, this may be less a product of a flawed theory than of a deficit in individuals' education, experience, ability, or effort.

In any case, we do not suppose that Kohlberg's stages of moral development represent anything like a final and definitive theory. We are skeptical, for example, of his claim that the stages come "always in the same order" and that "all movement [between stages] is forward in sequence and does not skip steps" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 20). We know from first-hand experience people who have transitioned "backward" from the sort of moral universalism that Kohlberg considers the pinnacle of moral development to cultural relativism or even ethical egoism. Moreover, even if Kohlberg were correct about the invariant ordering of the stages, his claim would still beg key questions about which moral theory is true by assuming that the later stages of *psychological* development correspond to higher stages of *moral* development. What's more, he focuses too much on the cognitive side of moral development and neglects its essential

affective components. Most famously, perhaps, his theory has been criticized by the feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) for its “male” bias, privileging the value of justice over the value of care. In his early studies, Kohlberg’s research subjects were all male, and we now know that his descriptions of moral development do not take proper account of common differences in moral psychology between males and females. Kohlberg’s theory of moral development also exhibits a perspectival bias by generalizing from the moral judgments of Americans.

Nevertheless, we see great plausibility in a rough, three-tier hierarchy of moral development consisting of a *pre-conventional* egocentric or self-interested stage, a *conventional* social conformist stage, and a *post-conventional* stage of adherence to principles that transcend self-interest or group identity. On this much, all three of the seminal psychologists we have cited—Piaget, Kohlberg, and Gilligan—agree. Significantly, the types of moral development expressed in theories taken most seriously within academic philosophy—utilitarianism, Kantianism, moral sentimentalism, and virtue ethics—are embraced only by people at the post-conventional stage. Our argument about the value of study-abroad experiences requires only that the broad, three-tier understanding of moral development be true.

### **The Moral Importance of Empathy**

We endorse the commonsense view that there is an important connection between empathy, as a motive, and moral behavior. We use the term “important connection” advisedly. Our position is *not* that empathy, of whatever strength, is *sufficient* for moral behavior. Like the radical loyalist described earlier, the extremely empathic person whose empathy is not guided by a cognitive understanding of morality can easily deviate from moral behavior, such as a parent who helps his or her child cheat in school to obtain a better grade, or a husband who knows his business-owner wife is falsifying her accounts but feels no obligation to report her. Nor is our

position that empathy is, strictly speaking, *necessary* for moral behavior. There seem to be many types of moral behavior that are motivated by affective states other than empathy: for example, a desire to preserve one's integrity, or a feeling of respect for another, or a resolve to uphold standards of fairness. Instead, our position is that empathy, *ceteris paribus*, is a quality that, morally speaking, it is better to have more of than less of.

When one looks for philosophical support for this position, one naturally turns first to the classical moral sentimentalists David Hume and Adam Smith. After all, the moral sentimentalists make affect a foundation of their moral systems, and empathy is a kind of affect. Somewhat surprisingly, the word "empathy" does not make a single appearance in Hume's or Smith's moral writings. This is not, however, because there is no place for empathy in classical moral sentimentalism, but because the English word "empathy" did not exist when Hume and Smith wrote (having been coined by the German philosopher Rudolf Lotze as a translation of the German word "*Einfühlung*"). The related concept that does figure prominently in Hume's and Smith's moral writings is *sympathy*. It appears 25 times in Hume's compact treatise *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, and an impressive 102 times in Smith's longer work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the very first chapter of which is entitled "Of Sympathy." In context, it is clear the emphasis on sympathy includes an emphasis on empathy as well.

Properly speaking, empathy is a kind of sympathy. In a synonym study that agrees generally with academic usage, *The Random House Dictionary* states that "empathy" "most often refers to a vicarious participation in the emotions, ideas, or opinions of others, the ability to imagine oneself in the condition or predicament of another," whereas "sympathy" signifies "a general kinship with another's feelings, no matter of what kind" ("Sympathy," n.d.). And an examination of Hume's and Smith's uses of the term "sympathy" in context reveals that they

often mean what we would today call empathy. Importantly, they both characterize sympathy as a kind of “fellow-feeling.” Hume calls it a “fellow-feeling with human happiness or misery” (1751/1983, p. 68), while Smith describes it as “our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” (1759/2004, p. 5). For moral sentimentalists, such fellow-feeling is part of the very basis of what Hume calls “moral distinctions” (such as the difference between right and wrong), as well as a motive to moral action (at least when one takes the view of an “impartial spectator,” in Smith’s famous words).

On a more explicitly utilitarian understanding as well, such as that of Jeremy Bentham (1789/2008) or John Stuart Mill (1861/1979), according to which morality requires promoting the greatest general happiness, empathy again has a crucial role to play. Most of us are not lacking in motivation to promote our own happiness (though we often irrationally prioritize our short-term happiness over our long-term happiness), but promoting the happiness of others, especially when those others are strangers and not family or friends, is a much more uncertain proposition. Empathy is invaluable in providing an incentive for altruism. We naturally seek to attain pleasure and avoid pain in ourselves, so when others’ pleasures and pains become ours as well, we seek to promote the former and prevent the latter.

Even a moral rationalist like Immanuel Kant was not blind to the moral importance of empathy. To be sure, “the ground of obligation,” for Kant, “must ... be sought not in the nature of man nor in the circumstances of the world in which man is placed, but ... a priori solely in the concepts of pure reason” (1785/1993, p. 389). Pure reason is free of any empirical elements, including all types of affect, which insofar as they relate to human beings “can only belong to anthropology” (p. 389). However, Kant saw a key role for empathy in overcoming our naturally selfish inclinations, which can constitute impediments to doing our duty. He avers that it is

a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors' prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish. (p. 457)

In short, because the sense of duty alone is not always sufficient to spur us to moral action, even a moral rationalist can appreciate the value of cultivating empathy.

### **How Study Abroad Promotes Moral Development**

Even at first blush it seems clear that study abroad could greatly facilitate moral development. First, let us consider *perspective-taking*, one of the key components of moral development. Just as the name implies, perspective-taking is the ability to see and understand another's point of view. In order to engage in perspective-taking, individuals must encounter other perspectives. Study abroad programs offer opportunities for students to encounter socioeconomic conditions that may be radically different from their own, thereby expanding their empirical knowledge. When students visit comparatively impoverished societies, they may become aware of hardship and suffering they did not know existed: malnourished children, enfeebled elderly struggling to fend for themselves, inadequate clothing and shelter, difficulty accessing clean drinking water. And even if they were aware of such conditions in the abstract, observing them in vivid detail in person may make a much deeper impression on their minds and emotions. As a result, perspective-taking with foreigners in dire need may become a real possibility for students in a way it wasn't before. Sometimes students have very different study-abroad experiences, visiting societies (e.g., in northern Europe) that they come to consider more advanced or civilized than their home countries. These experiences too can facilitate perspective-

taking. Students see alien customs and attitudes through new eyes and open their minds to possibilities of political, social, and economic organization that may be morally preferable to those they are accustomed to. Hence, perspective-taking can result in very different kinds of challenges to one's moral beliefs.

This leads us to another key step in moral development: cognitive disequilibrium. It is a truism that human beings are creatures of habit and that what we know to be "right" may simply be that which we have always believed. Research indicates that we are often just products of our environments: "Adolescents and their parents tend to see eye to eye in a variety of domains. Republican parents generally have Republican children; members of the Christian right have children who espouse similar views; parents who advocate for abortion rights have children who are pro-abortion" (Feldman, 2011, p. 397). Couples in new relationships sometimes come into conflict regarding holiday observances, with each person believing that the traditions to which he or she is accustomed are the "right" ones. Family and culture play a significant role in defining what is acceptable, and it may be viewed as acceptable simply because it has never been challenged. Interestingly, there is empirical evidence that exposing one's views to challenge does in fact create cognitive disequilibrium. Berk (2014) cites research which suggests that freshman college students are more dichotomous in their moral thinking than their sophomore and junior counterparts, who are more relativistic: "[V]iewing all knowledge as embedded in a framework of truth ... they [give] up the possibility of absolute truth in favor of multiple truths, each relative to its context" (p. 451). College seniors often have a moral system that is even more developed, as they recognize and attempt to resolve contradictions and create a moral system that has commitment to specific values: "[I]nstead of choosing between opposing views, they try to formulate a more personally satisfying perspective that synthesizes contradictions" and



“willingly revise their internal belief system when presented with relevant evidence” (p. 451). It seems that the more challenges we encounter, the more our worldview is forced to assimilate and accommodate new information.

Because study-abroad experiences oftentimes create cognitive disequilibrium, they may facilitate movement into the later stages identified by Kohlberg. As noted earlier, Kohlberg’s theory has been criticized on the grounds that relatively few people attain the highest post-conventional level—that is, recognition of universal moral norms—but this may be a reflection of a lack of suitable conditions for advancement. It is easier to hold to an ethic of conformity to cultural mores if one has not encountered real problems in other cultures. For example, the widespread abuse or subjugation of women may be intensely abhorrent to a cultural relativist who encounters it in person, and this abhorrence may thrust him or her into a cognitive disequilibrium that he or she can escape only by becoming a moral universalist—for example, by seeing such maltreatment as a violation of universal human rights.

We turn, finally, to a third key element of moral development, the cultivation of empathy. No doubt human beings are genetically hard-wired with a disposition to empathic response. We noted above that a kind of empathy is apparent in the behavior of our primate cousins and human infants. But the fact that a disposition is innate does not mean that it is unmodifiable. Like many human capacities, the capacity for empathy is one that can be either cultivated or inhibited.

Empathy expert Roman Krznaric, who has taught sociology and political science at Cambridge University and City University, London, and advised Oxfam and the United Nations on utilizing empathy as a means to social change, identifies “six habits of highly empathic people.” Two of these are particularly relevant in the context of study abroad: Empathic people

characteristically “cultivate curiosity about strangers” and “challenge prejudices and discover commonalities” (Krznicaric, 2012).

One need not have studied abroad to be curious about strangers. Even people who have led the most parochial lives can be intensely curious about strangers, sometimes to the point of impertinence. But for people not already thus disposed, study abroad can spark a fresh desire to understand “the other.” Such curiosity might be a kind of coping strategy: To avoid material and psychological difficulties in their new environment, students must understand something of the customs, values, hopes, and history of the new people around them, and they naturally become curious about these people. Friendships that begin for pragmatic reasons come to be valued for their own sakes, as mutual understanding and concern take root. Even when coping is not a challenge, however, study abroad can facilitate curiosity about strangers by removing students from their accustomed routines and social environments. Humans are by nature social animals, and when the social urge cannot be satisfied by interacting with family members and old friends, it nudges us to engage with strangers and learn more about them.

As students learn more about the people they meet abroad and discover commonalities with them, they find their prejudices challenged. It is well-known that college students, in the course of their studies and other experiences, often undergo dramatic changes in their worldviews. We noted earlier the evidence for the development of moral thinking during the college years. What drives this is the cognitive disequilibrium induced by exposure to new information, values, attitudes, and arguments—of a variety greater and a caliber more formidable than those encountered in high school. It should come as no surprise that the scope of a person’s empathy is restricted by his or her prejudices against those whose traits and values are perceived as “other.” Study-abroad experiences can be enormously effective in undermining such

prejudices. Students come to see that the “foreigners” around them are really not so different: They have the same basic needs and desires, and exhibit the same character strengths and weaknesses, as people the students knew back home. And prejudices in favor of the mores of one’s own society can crumble when one is confronted with incontrovertible evidence that societies can function just as well or better with a different set of mores.

### **Conclusion**

There are strong reasons to believe that study abroad can promote moral development. Study-abroad programs mold participants by inducing them to engage in perspective-taking, challenging their moral beliefs, enhancing the complexity of their worldviews, and weakening cognitive and affective barriers to the expansion of the scope of their feelings of empathy. We recognize that we have not supported our case with hard empirical data, because we have been unable to find any—which does not surprise us, given the lack of recognition of the potential benefits of study abroad in moral development. The only research we have found that discusses the relationship between study abroad and student development focuses on academics (see footnote 1) or the cultivation of what is sometimes called “cultural competence” (see, e.g., Pedersen, 2009).

We would welcome empirical research into the question of whether study abroad in fact fosters moral development. Such research will involve a choice of both an instrument for measuring moral development at a particular time and a method for measuring its growth over a span of time.

The choice of instrument will be controversial in the same ways that the identification of a true moral theory is controversial. Some researchers might prefer Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview; others might prefer surveys designed to overcome the perceived biases in the

Kohlberg survey; still others might prefer a survey developed in light of recent neuroscientific findings related to moral psychology. (For an extended discussion of this last area, see Churchland, 2011.) The question of which survey instrument is best is not one we can settle. However, it is our belief that the serious candidate surveys would converge in presupposing a kind of “commonsense” morality; they would converge, for example, in holding that racism, sexism, and selfishness are moral deficiencies, while acceptance of free speech and a preference for diplomacy over war are moral strengths. Thus, the choice of instrument may to some extent be immaterial.

As for the method of applying the survey instrument, a longitudinal study is obviously needed, one which compares the level of students’ moral development both before and after their study-abroad experience. The *simplest* way of doing this (but not the *best* way, for a reason we will explain shortly) would be to give students who have signed up for a study-abroad program the survey just before they leave and then again upon their return. We predict that the before-and-after surveys, at least when the study-abroad experience spans a significant period of time (an academic year would be a much more telling period than two or three weeks), will show some statistically significant moral development. However, the evidence that the study-abroad experience *caused* the moral development (assuming it is observed) will be only *correlational*. It could be that the students surveyed were already on a trajectory of moral development, a trajectory unaltered by the study-abroad experience. For this reason, it would be more revealing to administer the before-and-after surveys to a larger group of students, a group whose educational experiences were similar except for participation in a study-abroad program. A more pronounced degree of moral development within the study-abroad population would be stronger evidence that the study-abroad experiences are playing a causal role in moral development. Even

a more ambitious study such as this, however, could not decisively disentangle causation and mere correlation. For, in theory, it could be that the presence or absence of a predisposition to undergo a certain kind of moral development causes some students to choose study-abroad experiences and other students to avoid them, rather than the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a study-abroad experience causing moral development or the lack thereof. We can think of no way to overcome such theoretical uncertainties.

Nevertheless, we do not believe that the current lack of supporting empirical data negates the plausibility of our argument; rather, the lack of data merely shows that the argument is potentially vulnerable to empirical refutation.

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