Editor’s Note: Rare is the research on study abroad that helps define what we so often refer to as the "transformational experience." A recent study in Germany does just that, linking standard psychological measures to the effect of a sojourn abroad. We asked clinical psychologist Richard McGourty, a consultant to NAFSA who is familiar with our field, to do a review of this important new research in layman’s terms.

International educators have long sought research studies to support their direct observations: Students, when they return from study abroad, appear more mature than when they left. Is this due to the fact that the students are older, or is there something about the experience abroad that has accelerated their personal growth? While previous case studies suggest the experience itself influences this growth, a recent study by Zimmermann and Neyer1 warrants special attention by moving beyond a single university or a small sample size. Their finding: After study abroad, students indeed show more accelerated development in some of psychology’s standard “Big Five” personality traits—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—and that is a refreshing insight into the “transformational experience” so often talked about in the field.

There are two parts to this hypothesis: (1) international sojourns affect personality development, and (2) personality development is facilitated by forming new international relationships. In other words, interactions with those from a different background during the study abroad experience actively contribute to this growth.

Features of the Research

“PEDES—Personality Development of Sojourners,” recruited participants from approximately 200 German institutions of higher education. Ninety-four percent of these participants were on academic study as opposed to another type of study abroad experience, and the vast majority traveled to other European countries.
Interesting features of the study include:

- The researchers are not international educators, nor are they particular advocates for study abroad. While their research focuses on personality development, Zimmermann and Neyer seized on study abroad as a particularly relevant life experience through which to study “personality-environment transactions.” Consequently, their findings should not be viewed as driven by professional bias or guild interests.

- The study’s sample size included 527 sojourners and 607 controls.

- Efforts were made to detect and control for a self-selection effect or bias, perhaps the biggest challenge facing studies of this nature. (How can a study prove a change occurred because of the study abroad experience? Might the changes have occurred anyway?) After all, these are young people who are in a critical phase of social and emotional development. The predeparture measure allowed the researchers to identify differences between the sojourners and the controls, the latter being students who did not indicate any international mobility intentions. It also provided a baseline for each group.

- Ultimately, all three groups—short-term sojourners, long-term sojourners, and the controls—exhibited a pattern of personality change and some degree to which the change occurred. For example, even if the sojourners had a higher “openness” score at predeparture, they could still be compared to the controls by looking at how much the scores for each group increased or decreased over the course of the research.

- The study included social relationship measures that could quantify relationship gains and losses. This allowed the study to connect the degree of relationship building during the sojourn as well as changes in personality.

- The study used a German version of the Big Five Inventory (BFI)—a validated instrument—to measure the Big Five traits. Notably, the Big Five or Five-Factor Model has been validated for a wide range of ages and cultures.

- The BFI was administered three times—at baseline, at 5 months after departure (one semester), and at 13 months after departure (one academic year).

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<th>Group</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>5 months</th>
<th>13 months</th>
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<tr>
<td>Short-term Sojourners</td>
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<td>Long-term Sojourners</td>
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<td>Controls</td>
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The Big Five

Research into personality has generated many theories about the traits that constitute the basic elements of personality. Over time, researchers began asking which personality factors tended to be included in every theory. Factor analyses were conducted, and the following Big Five traits emerged.

**Openness to experience:** A measure of curiosity and a preference for novelty. The extent to which a person is imaginative or independent, openness reflects a personal preference for a range of activities instead of a routine.

**Conscientiousness:** A tendency to show self-discipline and to act dutifully; to make plans rather than be spontaneous; and to be dependable and well-organized.

**Extraversion:** An inclination to exhibit high energy, positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability and a preference for the company of others.

**Agreeableness:** Individuals who score high on agreeableness have a propensity toward being cooperative rather than difficult or antagonistic. It is also a measure of a trusting nature, and, generally, whether a person is even-tempered.

**Neuroticism:** An inclination to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, or vulnerability.
Is this study free of limitations? Of course not.

- Any experimental or quasi-experimental study of human personality is inherently difficult. Definitions are not precise, and predictably, the tools of measurement are subject to disagreement. Many theories have been generated along with any number of tests, which vary as to how many factors are needed to adequately describe personality. One long-standing measure of personality employs 16 factors, and another focuses on just three. However, in recent decades, the Five-Factor Model has enjoyed increasing acceptance among personality researchers. Increasing acceptance, however, is not the same as consensus.

- The study was conducted over a single academic year. The study does not indicate if the observed changes persisted beyond the time of the study.

- All of the students involved were German, and the vast majority studied in Europe. The study would have to be replicated in other areas before its findings could be generalized.

- The majority of students in the study felt comfortable with the language of their host country. This might arguably foster the development of social relationships that the researchers saw as facilitating personal development.

- “Short-term sojourners” studied abroad 5 months, and “long-term sojourners” studied for a full academic year, or 8 months. The results cannot be applied to study abroad experiences which are much briefer than 5 months.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not call into question the researchers’ basic findings.

**The Major Findings**

Broadly, the study supports the notion that study abroad can accelerate personal development. As we will see, there are advantages to long-term sojourning, and the impact of study abroad on personal development is built upon relationships that are created while on study abroad. It is not so much the sights that are seen as it is about the people who are encountered, with whom genuine relationships are developed.

**The Sojourn Effect**

The table below (page 4) identifies the gains experienced by the long-term sojourners in comparison with the control group. This comparison does not include the short-term sojourners, because they represent a different sojourn duration.

- Long-term sojourners experienced statistically significant personal growth in four of the five domains (openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) whereas the controls experienced gains in two (extraversion and neuroticism) and lost ground in one (openness).

- The long-term sojourners experienced greater personal growth than the controls in openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This is especially marked in the neuroticism domain. While both the long-term sojourners and the controls saw a decrease in neuroticism, the decline for the long-term sojourners was much steeper—a more positive developmental outcome.

**Sojourn Duration**

*The longer the sojourn, the less neuroticism, due to an experience of mastery.* Like their long-term counterparts, short-term sojourners also saw gains in openness and agreeableness. However, the decrease in neuroticism for short-term sojourners was not as pronounced as the decrease long-term sojourners experienced, and the decrease for the long-term sojourners accelerated in the second half of the academic year. The argument can be made that the 5-month sojourn requires the work and worry of adapting to a new culture but stops short of overcoming the worry to experience the achievement of mastering a new place.

**The Conscientiousness Effect**

*Short-term and long-term sojourners may have different goals.* Short-term sojourners scored higher on conscientiousness on the predeparture
Does Study Abroad Accelerate Personal Growth?

New Relationships Facilitate Personal Development

During a sojourn, young people are required to deal with the loss of routine contact with the people who support them. Sojourns of 5 months and certainly sojourns of a full academic year create the possibility, indeed the necessity, of constructing a network of relationships composed of the people they meet. According to these researchers, it is the creation of these new relationships that fosters personal growth. The long-term sojourners achieved that development to a greater extent than the control group.

Summary

Students who remain on their home campuses continue to mature, and must handle the normal challenges of people their age who are in higher education. Sojourners choose to live in an internationally diverse environment, separate from familiar support systems. Generally, that choice signals an interest in new experiences (openness), a preference for engaging with people (extraversion), a cooperative stance toward people (agreeableness), and freedom from crippling anxiety (neuroticism). The sojourners enjoy an advantage at the outset over a control group in their willingness to encounter a new culture and build relationships. After a significant time abroad, the study shows that the gap widens. Specifically, long-term sojourners accelerate their personal development in terms of greater openness, agreeableness, and reduced neuroticism to a greater extent than those who do not study abroad. The researchers’ own words provide a succinct summary: “Hitting the road has substantial effects on who we are. The difference is made by the international people we meet on that road and with whom we form new relationships.”

Richard McGourty, PhD, is a NAFSA consultant and clinical psychologist.
Endnotes


2 Zimmermann and Neyer, 516.

3 The Big Five Inventory (BFI) rated 42 items on a five-point scale. High levels of reliability (.72 - .90) were calculated for the five domains at all three measurement occasions.

4 This positive characterization of extraversion should not be read as an inference that introversion is dysfunctional. It is accepted that people possess capabilities to make good use of both types, but tend to prefer one to the other.